METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES

An Appraisal of Queer Consciousness and Religious Expression

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

As a new theory in the humanities and social studies, *Queer Theory* is not limited to matters sexual. Queer theory is a broad understanding which encompasses any understanding that is anti-normativity and anti-fixed identity. It is often discussed as *identity politics* by contemporary academics, philosophers and social commentators. It it within this overall context of identity politics that I discuss queer theology in this collection of essays from a phenomenological point of view. The Metropolitan Community Church as the prime example. This presentation is not exhaustive and I take Katherine Johnson's caveat as a warning concerning any narrow application of identity politics and "queer" interpretation of Christian literature or experience.

> … identity politics alone will not achieve the necessary impacts that are required to re-imagine the world we live in. Instead they are likely to win particular legislative reforms that regulate subjectivity, and rights that can be easily taken away under new regimes. [1]

Queer Theory, which is philosophically and consciously deeper than identity politics, which merely operates on a socio-legal level, offers an interpretation of what it is to be a human being through

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[1] *Sexuality a Psychosocial Manifesto,* (2015:180).

consciously encouraging alternative philosophical options. Thus, *queer* theory needs the antecedent *straight* theory from which to fashion its alternative perspective. In the same manner the MCC needs a theory of Western ecclesiology to fashion its alternative perspective. I content that in this sense queer theory presents as a negative philosophy, which has ironically been transformed into a positive philosophy, for the purposes of religious inclusion. These essays explore various aspects of this understanding of religious expression.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Queer consciousness and religious expression are in part, I maintain, observable in the realm of public philosophical consciousness, and not just in socio-legal practice. Just as heterosexual religious expression discloses a philosophical and theological interpretation of the divinity, so too does gay religious expression disclose a particular philosophical and theological interpretation of the divinity. While most of us are not professional philosophers, philosophical attitudes and convictions are a part of our day-to-day lives, even if they go unrecognized. Thus, I asked myself the question: "Where to begin in addressing queer consciousness and religious expression as observed in the public forum?" When I realized that there was a need for a new philosophical perspective to interpret queer consciousness and religious experience, I chose a phenomenological approach in which to frame my discussion. As a result, my investigative perspective in this work does not follow the classical analytical philosophical path, but rather observes the Metropolitan Community Church from a synthetic perspective, that is, from a holistic perspective in which the hole (Greek *holon*) is other than and greater than the sum of its parts. [2]

Up until recently, I was conscious of philosophical discussion as

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[2] Cf. Smuts, J. C. (1926) *Holism and Evolution*, MacMillan & Co.

predominately an objective *external* activity. That is, philosopher vs philosopher, attempting to find the ultimate truth behind human experience. Today, my experience in philosophical discussion revolves predominately around a subjective internal activity. Philosophical objectivity is secondary. As a result, I find myself occasionally *in opposition* to myself in seeking the truth of my experience. I am struggling with my inclination to hold on to my classical philosophical inheritance, even when there is no apparent *necessary* requirement to do so. Although it may appear reasonable to do so. In ancient Hellenic philosophy reason and necessity are interwoven. Aristotle taught that philosophy begins in the objective wonder and awe of the environment. This observation is accurate as long as I remain within the classical Hellenized context of Western philosophy. However, it is also true that philosophy begins with self-reflection. When I contemplate my experiences and become conscious of the differences of interpretation within myself, I am, in fact, in discussion with myself. There is no external wonderment generated by my internal discussion. What is generated is the desire for peace and harmony within myself through contemplation and resolution. In short, I desire wisdom. Yet, my philosophical contemplation does become engaged in a "struggle in love," as it were, with other seekers of wisdom and within myself for truth. This involves a discerning acceptance and rejection of philosophical ideas. Such discernment of philosophical ideas, however, is not totally unknown among philosophers and theologians. As Karl Rahner has noted: "Philosophy may in fact be somewhat 'eclectic'

in reflecting the unsystematic pluralism of the history of human experience and thought, and it must be ready to undergo changes in its theological use." [3] I think such discernment of an "unsystematic pluralism" is particularly evident in the case of the Metropolitan Community Churches.

Boundaries in phenomenology

My initial existential boundaries were limited by my environment. However, as I evolved and eventually "became of age," my boundaries slowly ceased to be physical or existential constraints alone. They were expanded by my conscious participation in life. Thus, to a degree, I participated in establishing them as horizons of consciousness, an expanding project of personal philosophical effort, continuously leading to a conscious rediscovery of myself. Within this rediscovery of myself, I continue to rely on experience and reason to define my phenomenological horizons. That is to say that with each new insight I adjust my phenomenological horizon towards religion accordingly.

In Daniel Guerrière's words, "Phenomenology does not seek to 'prove' that anything 'exists,' but inquires into that which presents itself for consciousness to process in the manner that it presents itself." [4] I am aware that a phenomenological approach often makes

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[3] *Encyclopedia of Theology. A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, (1986:1232), s. v. Philosophy and Theology.
[4] *Phenomenology of the Truth Proper to Religion*, (1990:5).

makes some philosophers and theologians uncomfortable, particularly evangelically-minded theologians. However, the reservation of evangelical theologians notwithstanding, according to Gregory Baum, through the philosophical efforts of Vatican II a new theological teaching concerning Christian anthropology emerged in the Church. This Christian anthropology, interpreted phenomenologically, disclosed a new self-understanding of the human condition by philosophers and theologians. A few years before I began my undergraduate studies, Baum wrote this insightful paragraph.

> The human race has passed from a rather static conception of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one. What is happening at the moment is that this teaching is being assimilated as self-knowledge. People are beginning to experience themselves in this way. Their new self-understanding determines their conscious actions and their reflective knowledge of reality. [5]

This new self-understanding of reality is a synthetic, not an analytic way, of understanding reality. My reflections in this book distinguish between the analytical and synthetic approaches to philosophy. Phenomenology is a synthetic approach. It may be useful to lay out in chart form some of the main characteristics of the two approaches overleaf.

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[5] *The Credibility of the Church Today: A Reply to Charles Davis*, (1968:186).

Comparison of Analytical and Synthetic Philosophical Characteristics

Characteristics	Analytic tradition	Synthetic tradition
Core ideals	Emphasis on abstraction, agnosticism, clarity, coherence, consistency, generalizability, parsimony, precision, reason, rigor, science, and systematicity	Emphasis on creativity, critique, depth, experience, history, holism, imagination, metaphor, originality, phenomenology, politics, and transcendence
Writing styles	Convergent, disciplined, and sometimes dry writing styles, inspired by logic and the sciences	Divergent, playful, and sometimes convoluted writing styles, inspired by the arts and humanities
Theoretical aims	Analysis; developing precise definitions of key concepts and linking these concepts in logical propositions based on coherent arguments	Synthesis; developing critical, holistic, and imaginative analyses of contemporary social issues and linking them to interrelated issues
Logics of progress	Each empirical study makes a novel contribution to a widely established theoretical puzzle embedded in a communally shared research paradigm	Each grand theory aspires to articulate a radically original interpretation of the world, with few presuppositions, sometimes invoking the ideas of other grand theories
Use of contexts	Uses the real-world as a context for the development and clarification of generalizable theories	Examines the real-world for its inherent significance and engages with the politics of those contexts
Critique	Analytic scholarship is viewed as formulaic, lifeless, mechanistic, overgeneralized, rigid, soulless, stifling, and uncritical by the synthetic tradition	Synthetic scholarship is viewed as as convoluted, descriptive, esoteric, fanciful, sloppy, speculative, unscientific, and unsystematic, by the analytic tradition

<u>On thinking in print</u>

In this book, I write in the first-person singular, whenever possible, taking into account my experience as if I were thinking out loud and expressing it via print. I do this as an "ally" of LGBT+ issues. [6] I am of the opinion that knowledge of ourselves, and of the world, is destined to advance indefinitely through philosophical effort, even though in the present time philosophy has suffered from the advance of the technological sciences. In an essay entitled, "The University Curriculum" George Grant makes the point that philosophy has not yet overcome the inadequacies that caused its role to be taken over by the "soft" and "hard" sciences and the effect this has had on religious consciousness. [7]

Yet, despite the current lack of overall interest in philosophy, I hope to present a new philosophical perspective within the developing field of Queer Studies. I have chosen the context of Queer Studies because it is an emerging area of moral and cultural thought that needs philosophical attention to be humanely appreciated. An analytic understanding of Queer Studies alone is inadequate. Plus,

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[6] "The term 'queer' also can include 'allies' who may not themselves identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or questioning, but stand in solidarity with their queer sisters and brothers in terms of seeking a more just world with respect to sexuality and gender identity." (Cheng. *Radical Love*, p. 3.)

[7] "It is not possible in this article to state how or why the quantifying and experimental methods have become dominant in the sciences, or how this development is related to the freeing of the particular sciences from the magistery of philosophy or to relate both these to the falling away of any belief in revelation." (*Technology and Empire*, p. 121.)

the newness and freshness of queer consciousness provides an excellent locus and opportunity for philosophical renewal. Although I am a theologian by education, I do not make any philosophy dependent upon theology, or religious faith, as has been done in the past by institutional theologians and religious philosophers. Rather, my approach is that of an independent thinker whose thought is eclectic, drawing upon various notions within the perspective of Western "philosophical dehellenization." [8]

Philosophers of queer consciousness are at the point of determining their own intellectual path by judiciously accepting theoretical elements from classical philosophy and theology and integrating them within queer existential understanding. To date, queer consciousness has succeeded in attracting the theological attention of the Christian Pastoral Care Ministry to a notable degree. The more difficult task will be attracting the attention, in print, of Christian theologians to the sensitive problems arising from the doctrinal and dogmatic interpretation of a queer consciousness.

Conscious experience

Out of consideration for the reader's presumed different understanding, I must introduce at this point a word on my understanding of human consciousness, and its role or function within philosophy. Consciousness is not a philosophy in itself, but

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[8] For an excellent introduction to this concept see, Dewart, Leslie, *The Future of Belief: Theism in a World Come of Age* (Herder & Herder, 1966).

it is an evident *quality of the human mind* when the mind undertakes any deliberate intellectual activity. My conscious activity is a self-disposition through which I may render my experience meaningful and worthwhile to myself as well as for others. Therefore, I am not surprised when my faith is challenged by the different interpretations of the doctrines and dogmas reflecting the meaning of religious life as it evolves and develops. Of course, my problem is not with the content of the doctrines and dogmas of the faith as I have inherited them. My problem is a conscious *interpretation* of this doctrinal and dogmatic content in light of my contemporary experience.

What am I to make of them as revelation? That being the case, I can only believe in the kind of God whose presence is consonant with my moral existential experience of doctrine and dogma. Existential experience is not a theoretical experience. In my understanding, the presence of God remains in place independent of any philosophical interpretation that I may make of God's absence. Thus, I am challenged philosophically and in conscience on how to take advantage of an evolutionary understanding of my experience to improve upon and update my quality of mind when understanding God, rather than defending an inherited, and inadequate, traditional concept of God.

Phenomenological philosophers offer a new interpretation of contemporary queer consciousness which has appeared only

somewhat recently in the evolution of human consciousness. (I undertake no discussion of pathological consciousness, individually or collectively, rather, I confine my comments to the consciousness of healthy individuals whose experience is free from any clinical definition.) Human consciousness, in contrast to brute consciousness, discloses that humans are responsible in fact for the conditions of life they establish. Explaining these conditions of life is a role undertaken by the "soft sciences" within Western culture. On the other hand, interpretation of these conditions of life, not explanation, is the task of philosophy in Western culture. [9] Within my theological perspective, I do not acknowledge a fixed "divine plan," reflecting some form of predestination for all humanity. However, there is the opportunity for a consciously co-created societal agenda, for better or for worse, soliciting the participation of all human beings within God's presence. Given this perspective, I realize that I *presently* lack a satisfactory future agenda, which I *now* want to establish. Or, which is the same realization that my

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[9] In the matter of interpretation, I follow the perspective of Moritz Schlick who said, "I hope I have not been misunderstood as though I were advocating an actual separation of scientific and philosophical work. On the contrary, in most cases future philosophers will have to be scientists because it will be necessary for them to have a certain subject matter on which to work — and they will find cases of confused or vague meaning particularly in the foundations of the sciences. But, of course, clarification of meaning will be needed very badly also in a great many questions with which we are concerned in our ordinary human life. Some thinkers, and perhaps some of the strongest minds among them, may be especially gifted in this practical field. In such instances, the philosopher may not have to be a scientist — but in all cases he will have to be a man of deep understanding. In short, he will have to be a wise man." *College of the Pacific Publications in Philosophy*, I (1932:45-62).

present life-plan is lacking in some fashion, and needs a revision in light of future conscious objectives. A LGTBQ+ consciousness challenges the adequacy of modern norms, and tends not to accept the existing situation but envisions, revises and creates a new agenda appropriate to a LGTBQ+ future.

Let me be clear at this point that I am not seeking to develop a philosophy that accounts for a universal understanding of queer consciousness, but to develop a workable philosophy for the person who desires to act morally and religiously in particular situations of the gay life-style. That is, I am attempting to construct a philosophical tool for queer use. In other words, I am proposing an integral philosophical methodology for gay individuals to live a self-directed moral life, and not a life determined by *a priori* standards. My suggested moral approach is based on my experience and in light of an historical and an evolutionary understanding of consciousness which was unavailable to classical philosophers.

Further, my purpose is to provide an appropriate and acceptable philosophical point of view (which is provisional at this point) that adequately supports the experience of queer consciousness in our contemporary world. Classically inclined readers may find my philosophical ideas unconventional. Most likely because I borrow from other philosophers and theologians and subsequently adapt their ideas to my purposes — hence I undertake an eclectic philosophy, the results of which are somewhat unconventional, but

are becoming more common within Western scientific society.

My phenomenological approach in interpreting queer consciousness means that I must include myself as a participant in the interpretation of what I observe and experience. I must become an ally in queer understanding, and not merely chronicle for criticism my observations of queer activity. As well, a crucial point that needs to be re-addressed, from my point of view, is that human experience is intelligible and can be contrasted to brute experience. Human experience is often understood as an ex-animal experience by philosophers. Human experience is not ex-angelic, nor ex-divine. Humans are not fallen angels, nor fallen gods. From a traditional Western theological point of view humans did not *evolve out* of God, they are *made* in God's image and likeness through God's agency. At least in Christian understanding. An obverse philosophical point of view may be acceptable within Christian understanding. That is, human nature is somehow disclosed phenomenologically as "ex-perfection" and is seen in contrast, yet in relation to, a divine presence. The notion of humanity as co-creator, participating in divine powers, is derived from this alternative perspective. In this collection of essays, I suggest that the interpretation of human experience has evolved intelligibly *in relation to the presence God*, and not solely in concert with animal biological experience. Hence, sin remains an element for theological consideration in queer consciousness as will be discussed later.

So, I begin the next essay by philosophizing in a new key.

PHILOSOPHIZING IN A NEW KEY

An alternative discourse

Christian philosophy, must find a way of making space for various kinds of philosophical discourse within its intellectual perspective, and not rely solely on its classical philosophical inheritance. With that intent, I undertake my philosophical interpretation within a dehellenized philosophy. A dehellenized understanding is not a fixed understanding, but a dynamic stance that is perpetually undergoing evolution and reconstruction. In short, dehellenized philosophy is a phenomenological philosophy. Currently, I interpret philosophy and theology phenomenologically by observing the relationships that I consciously cultivate within my community of faith. At bottom, I ask: Am I to consciously construct the future of my belief, or am I to remain satisfied with a pre-critical, inherited belief? Looking to the future, the problem is that it is not easy to give any concrete shape to a final philosophical understanding in my life. However, I try to accomplish in my life what philosophers have always tried to accomplish in one form or another. That is, to arrange my ideas into an insightful mosaic of a personal, but not private, set of meanings.

The shift to a new philosophical key

My philosophical and theological development eventually led me to recognize that the interpretation of queer issues developing today

are social phenomena that need the support of an appropriate philosophical and theological perspective. Traditional theology fails in establishing an inclusive interpretation of queer experience because of its inadequate classical epistemological principles. This is not to gainsay any scientific, psychological, social or cultural efforts at understanding queer issues. I question only the classical philosophical and theological understanding.

Phenomenological interpretation has transposed my philosophical and theological understanding into a new key free from the intellectual constraints of classical understanding. I do not say that classical understanding is erroneous, but rather that it is inadequate for the contemporary interpretation of human experience. My experience of the inadequacy of the classical philosophy, which I had been taught since I entered university, soon developed into philosophical dissatisfaction. And that dissatisfaction translated into a sense of rootless meaning regarding my philosophical perspective. The Second Vatican Council addressed this shift away from an outdated classical philosophy.

After the Second Vatican Council, and incorporating the alternative *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* approaches to interpreting the church's teachings, I re-adjusted the relationships between myself and my environment, including God. In short, re-adjustment took the form of replacing accommodation to the *will* of God, with the recognition of the *presence* of God. Many such re-adjustments

concerning my relationship with God meant that I had "come of age" in responsibly living my religious life. God was not totally responsible for everything anymore. I was now co-responsible with God in living out my life in the divine presence. The realization that God was not responsible for everything anymore was an intellectual shock for me. As well, it also marked a definite and identifiable turning point in my thinking. It opened the door whereby I changed my attitude and disposition towards my future, and realized that I was a co-responsible agent fashioning the culture and society of my life-world in God's presence.

I am often led through further experience to ask myself: Is church membership a prerequisite for doing theology? Can I consciously construct Catholic theology outside of the revelation of the Christ? My answer, to date, is that in order to construct Catholic theology, I need to "enchurch" my thinking somehow. To "enchurch" my thinking, however, is not to be dependent upon the doctrinal or dogmatic ideas of an ecclesiastical history. Rather, "enchurching" my theology includes the reading and digesting of texts of other philosophers and theologians, who raise existential philosophical questions, and not just those of institutional Christendom. In other words, "enchurching" is an ecclesial activity that invites one into a relationship between the belief of the church community, and the belief of the non-church community. Thus, "enchurching" my beliefs takes into account this difference, and the difference it makes within my philosophy.

An altered theological perspective

My work as a theologian today is undertaken differently than the work of theologians in the days of the dominant theological systems within the medieval universities. The introduction of new philosophical thinking has always preceded developments in theological thinking. The pattern is similar to the myth and folk lore that preceded philosophical thinking as an advancement, which in turn gave rise to scientific thinking as progress. In light of the history of human thinking there is likely to be no final philosophy, or theology. Given that understanding, I see my task as primarily making known, or providing for future generations an interpretive approach to the truths of Christianity. Thus, my quest for "truth" today requires that philosophizing theologically be undertaken in a new key.

Philosophizing in a new key is the conscious quest for being one's true self within the evolution of the world. But not merely through the biological process of evolution that brought "humanity down from the trees," but, rather in the cultural evolutionary process that may makes it possible for humanity "to climb to the stars." Evolution directs itself upward and outward, not downward and inward. The cultural evolutionary process is a human-directed stage of development, something in which brute animals do not engage. To this end, and in the particular case of Queer Studies, I attempt to re-evaluate the relationship between religious philosophical belief and a consciously queer theology. While the philosophical

understanding of theology ranks first in the *chronological* order of general human knowledge, the Christian understanding of theological revelation is primary within the *moral* order of human knowledge. And any re-conceived Christian order knowledge must preserve this understanding since for most Christians the faith takes precedence over philosophical criticism.

Ultimately, as a Christian, I recognize divergent philosophical interpretations of theology and accept them as legitimate. That is not to say, however, I must embrace all of them equally. To date, I have come to understand that I live as a co-fashioner, not just as a creature fashioned by God, within the felt presence of God but I participate in co-fashioning, to some degree, the person I become. I recognize that any personal self-fulfillment is intrinsically related to my self-realization. As a religious person my self-fulfillment and self-realization are no longer dependent upon the plan of an external divinity. What I make myself to be, my (limited) self-realization in other words, discloses my unique status within the presence of God, thereby constituting a moral self-fulfillment.

Finally, I do not understand God as a "force," but as a "presence." Given the foregoing perspective, I suggest that there are significant positive reasons for queer individuals to think philosophically (and theologically) within the new key of phenomenology.

THE OPEN CHURCH

In the philosophy of the West the traditional arguments for what constitutes a church have lost their validity to a great degree in light of a contemporary sociological understanding. Humanity's self-understanding has produced new models of social organization for the ecclesia. Harvey Cox discusses the difference between "order" and "organization" as they pertained to the ecclesia. He writes:

> The order had a traditional, ethnic, or sacral basis. The medieval guild, the Gothic tribe, the Greek polis, the primitive clan are examples of orders. An order encompasses all or most of the facets of social existence. It relates a person to a mythical past, a total way of life, a secure identity. It corresponds roughly to certain aspects of what we have designated as tribal and town society. In contrast to the order, the organization is flexible, future-orientated, secularized, and limited in its scope. Although its predecessors appeared long ago, only in the secular epoch has it become the characteristic principle of social integration. In contradiction to its bucolic critics' claims, the organization offers many more possibilities for choice and creativity than were available in the age of the sacral order. [10]

The foundational issue is whether or not the concept of divine

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[10] *The Secular City*, (p. 152).

transcendence is in keeping with humanity's contemporary experience of reality. In contemporary Western society, organization has trumped order as the determining principle.

Does the MCC regard itself as the Church of Christ in any unique sense? The answer would seem to be no. The reality of the MCC does not begin with Jesus and the community of his followers. Nor are the core notions of the MCC church founded on an administrative or juridical notion of union. Rather, it acknowledges that humanity is basically estranged from itself and it seeks to establish a recognition of common worth within an ecclesial context. As an historical and social phenomenon, the MCC is susceptible to a critical analysis to show how, in its community, humanity may move into greater self-realization by authentically relating to others more inclusively.

The MCC is not to be envisioned as a fringe phenomenon with no significant impact on human cultures. The Church is not comprised solely of members of the gay communities as they struggle to exist spiritually and religiously within various cultures. However, their struggles create alternative patterns of worship and ritual, or, at least modify existing ones. The MCC church thus has dynamic "sign value" for contemporary society and it ought not to be considered a social pathology.

But this is not to suggest that the MCC is free from human

corruption and malice. Like all social institutions it is susceptible to the forces of human corruption. It is not that every human institution is corrupted, but that every institution is vulnerable to pathological deformations. There is always within the established churches of Christianity some sense of a counter-church within the body politic of believers. The MCC has demanded and has received support for their rights from the civil authorities. However, this counter-church is not founded on any particular ideology meant to isolate the community from others and assert its influence in society. Rather, the counter-church is the product of a conscious process of inclusion and internal change. There is no intention to establish a self-isolating community within society. The MCC is there to serve the interests of a wider community of diverse individuals.

The MCC is a church whose existence points beyond the traditional ecumenical movement. There is a welcoming of individuals outside any particular faith community and a desire to dialogue with them. Gregory Baum's original insight seems to be bearing fruit with the establishment of the MCC. He wrote:

> We conclude that the ecumenical movement which widens the common ground between the Churches has, through its social processes, such a profound effect on the participating Churches that the doctrinal obstacles to unity, existing between them, could be overcome without compromise and

without conversion. [11]

Accordingly, misconceptions are overcome, and there is often a healing effect and a sense of a team-responsibility of all church members in the making of public policy. Through such participation in the community, one cannot forget the end for which the MCC exists. The MCC cannot become other than what it is since all participate in a common project. Its growth will be in serving the needs of present minorities, not aspiring to social or political privileges. It other words, the MCC sets a deliberate aim to be culturally inclusive and welcoming, which one could argue is not natural to the human condition. Within human history, competition, not cooperation, is the dominant value. The MCC desires to be counter-cultural and to fashion a future for all humanity where privatization (isolation) of the faith is not a characteristic of the human presence.

What one might argue concerning the MCC as a Christian organization is the lack of any sense of traditional redemption in its theological positions. It is certainly a church of this world and constitutes itself as a social reality. So, what then might the reasons be that individuals become and remain as MCC members if there is no metaphysical or redemptive motivation? What apologetics, if any, does the MCC offer an inquirer in this regard? I ask this question not from the point of view of the non-believer, but from the

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[11] *The Credibility of the Church Today*, (p. 95).

point of view of the believer who is likely to question personal belief in order to determine any compatibility with the MCC. One difficulty for the traditional Christian believer is that the MCC has no formal apologetics to convince the believer, or non-believer, to join the Church.

This chapter is deliberately entitled "The Open Church" by me, because there is no suggestion that divine revelation has been closed by any historical convention. In other words, the traditional Christian understanding that revelation was closed with the death of the last apostle is not maintained by the MCC as far as I am aware. There is no evidence in MCC teaching that the formulation of divine-human values developed homogeneously within history. Its values are inherent in human worth alone. Related to this understanding is the direction of movement of the MCC into the world rather than away from the world. It seeks the world in all its variety and desires that, as a universal community, it becomes a welcoming place. [12] MCC accepts the common humanity of all within a universal solidarity.

A theological development within humanity, as I understand it, is the re-interpretation of God as understood as divine transcendence.

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[12] I suggest the MCC could only have come into existence within a social context described as "urbanization" by Harvey Cox. "Urbanization means a structure of common life in which the diversity and the disintegration of tradition are paramount." One might view urbanization as the "queering" of society. *The Secular City*, (1967:4).

Clearly the traditional language of Western culture will not suffice. A new and contemporary anthropological language is changing our conceptions. How might this new anthropological language be embodied in the MCC from the point of view of a phenomenological philosopher? I offer one possibility here.

Humans are listeners. They listen to other people and to the divinity as they perceive it. Through listening, humanity comes to know the creation of which it is a part. As a listener humanity is always ready to hear more about itself. Humans dialogue with each other in order to determine their relationships with each other as respectful persons. That is, humans do not want to remain who they are. Rather, they want to become who they truly are through the self-knowledge that results from listening to others. In this process humanity needs a human community to become itself. This need cannot be filled by any socialized individualism that is often evident in religious organizations. As listeners, in dialogue among themselves, humanity makes room for the presence of God within its future. Here the perspective is not so much that humanity is made in God's image and likeness, but rather that God is fashioned in humanity's wonderous image and likeness, warts and all. How could a phenomenological philosopher sum up the characteristics of an open church which sees itself promoting such a concept of God?

Among the possibilities of such a view are that the open church appears as a reconciler within society since it is in solidarity with

the human community within which it lives. It is apparent that it wants to help solve the problems of human suffering as an outer-oriented movement in society. There are many ways of belonging to an open church depending upon the gifts and interests of the members. Individual members may choose their own way of belonging to it. There are no visible social boundary lines in an open church. In short, the open church is not a spiritual replica of any political society.

CHURCH OR GAY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY?

Recently an acquaintance of mine observed, in my presence, that podcasts are slowly appearing alongside traditional broadcasts in media culture. That observation was intended to indicate to me that the once dominant and ubiquitous media network systems were now facing competition from satellite or "local" outlets which served individual creativity and innovation in a more satisfactory manner. Podcasts present a cultural challenge to existing networks. Further, listeners are now personally able to consume podcasts at a time convenient to their choosing. One may say that podcast technology is designed for consumption by an individual in isolation; whereas broadcast technology is designed for consumption *en mass* by a community.

The established churches, in the 21st century, must enter into a dialogue with their adherents to reformulate their witness to divine revelation in response to existential threats to individual and collective human existence. In some jurisdictions of ecclesial polity this dialogue has already begun and has achieved varying, but not necessarily satisfying, degrees of success. Gregory Baum cites Vatican II as a case in point with respect to the Catholic tradition.

> Even people who are not particularly interested in religion
> know that the Vatican Council has made significant changes

in Catholic life. It has changed the relationship of Catholics with other people—with other Christians, with Jews, with members of other religions, and even with men not interested in religion at all. People usually know that at Vatican II the Catholic Church has approved of dialogue with others, dialogue within the Church, and—by changing the language of the liturgy—dialogue of God's Word and man's response. [13]

I ask the question: will the MCC enjoy any success in its move into the world?

Taking a cue from Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes,* The Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World, I recognize a philosophical and theological opportunity for the faithful to direct the evolution of change in the reformulation of Christian doctrine. In acknowledging deep-seated changes in the structure of life, the framers of the Constitution encouragingly stated:

The spiritual uneasiness of today and the changing structure of life are part of a broader upheaval, whose symptoms are the increasing part played on the intellectual level by the mathematical, natural and human sciences and on the practical level by their repercussions on technology. The scientific mentality has brought about a change in the cultural sphere and on habits of thought, and the progress of

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[13] *The Credibility of the Church Today*, (p. 12).

> technology is now reshaping the face of the earth and has its
> sights set on the conquest of space.
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> The human mind is, in a certain sense, increasing its mastery
> over time—over the past through the insights of history, over
> the future by foresight and planning. ... As a result, the
> traditional structure of local communities—family, clan,
> tribe, village, various groupings and social relationships, is
> subjected to ever more sweeping changes. [14]

To my mind, these deep-seated cultural changes have provided the context for the MCC to expand the understanding of the traditional Christian doctrines in light of the contemporary needs of humanity. Here is an opportunity to re-interpret one's life of faith from within an existential perspective, as an alternative to the classical perspective of Western philosophy. As the churches have entered a new cultural age of religious practice in the West, they have also entered a new philosophical age in which they must learn to declare the gospel inclusively to the people of today. Calvinism and its variants have no place in the future of Christianity from the perspective of the MCC.

Declaring the gospel to the people of today requires both an *aggiornamento* and a *ressourcement* to be carried out individually and collectively by the faithful and their community. Christians

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[14] Flannery, (1996:166) *Gaudium et Spes*, (para. 5-6).

living in a new cultural setting must interpret their experiences through an existential philosophy, an *aggiornamento.* Further, these same Christians must revisit and examine their sources of cultural formation, a *ressourcement* which discloses nothing less than a new religious consciousness of ecclesial phenomena in contemporary society. *Ressourcement* further discloses a new consciousness by which the faithful experience themselves and adjust themselves to their religious environment.

An *aggiornamento* and a *ressourcement* amount to the first stage in doctrinal evolution at the deepest level of personal meaning. One's personal understanding is revealed by such questions as: How are we threatened, or supported, by our very human condition with its potential for releasing either a destructive or a constructive power? This question is of particular interest to LGTBQ+ individuals who may view being queer as posing a threat from straight society to their well-being. I suggest that the reverse is also the case, straight society may conceive itself as threatened by queer society. Thus, this is a significant question for the traditional Churches and religious communities in our time which purport to address the fundamental questions of being human in the context of the 21st century Western culture.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World acknowledged that humanity is in a new cultural age (para. 4-10). Although the question of doctrine and dogma is not explicitly

addressed in these passages, I suggest that changes in pastoral ministry necessarily beg changes in the doctrinal and dogmatic teaching by the church's theologians. Gregory Baum has noted: "In the strongest terms, the conciliar text speaks of the social, intellectual, moral and religious transformations that are taking place. It describes 'the broad and deep revolution' that is occurring in humanity at this time." [15] To my mind, Baum's broad and deep revolution has the potential to affect a re-interpretation of doctrine and dogma. The MCC appears to be an example of that revolution.

In the stable hierarchical world, that was supported by the Roman Church, Western humanity conceived itself religiously within the greater scheme of God's creation. However, in the dynamic, and thus less-than-stable world of today, individual and collective self-identity is more difficult to establish. In the past our religious identity was established through the family, the nation, the local culture and the universal church to which the faithful belonged. Today this apparently stable hierarchy is being questioned, re-interpreted, and even rejected, which leads to a destabilization of one's personal identification and an increasing anxiety with respect to future existence. For many current philosophers and theologians, the hierarchical model of society is being replaced by a mosaic model of society where various individual societies make up the whole of human society. In the mosaic model society is conceived

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[15] *Faith and Doctrine*, (p. 104). The book has a Nihil Obstat and Imprimatur.

as "holistic," that is, as other and greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, the questions raised are: Who are we as individuals living within a mosaic community? Who are we as Christians living within a mosaic community? These are relevant questions posed by the contemporary faithful from many Christian churches. They must be answered on a personal and political (ecclesial) level in addition to a doctrinal one. These questions will need to be answered in light of the increasing and influential public presence of the LGBTQ+ Christian community. To recognize that the gospel is God's saving reply to the deepest threats to human existence is an advancement in the evolution of doctrinal/dogmatic consciousness. On the presumption that God is interested in the welfare of humanity, the word of God is recognized as deliberately disclosed within the experience of all humanity. There is no privileged race or culture in this regard.

With this realization of an open community, the Christian theological doctrine that revelation ceased with the death of the last apostle becomes questionable. If revelation is conceived to be open any subsequent doctrinal development cannot be but commentary up to the present time. For the benefit of all humanity, which is the church's mission, the traditional apostolic witness to Christ (i.e., scripture and tradition) needs to be recognized as evolving in light of current experience. Patrick Cheng will add reason and experience

to the two traditional apostolic sources. [16] Jesus of Nazareth believed in God as an agent in his life which was not uncommon among the prophets and seers of his day. What is recognized today however, by many unconventional religious philosophers, is that God's agency is an affected experience of humanity's perfected self-image conceived and projected as an effecting transcendental and supernatural being in all respects. This philosophical (psychological) recognition of God, as but a product of human intellectual development, is an important stage in the evolution of humanity's self-reflexive creative consciousness which is often deeply misunderstood. In short, this change in Christian understanding, due to a new human consciousness, needs to be interpreted in a new key of philosophical awareness. Understanding the mission of the Church, or churches, from being called exclusively into salvation and set apart, to calling inclusively and universally, constitutes this new philosophical key.

A change in the Christian conception of God, and any subsequent doctrinal development, from *agency* to a *presence* in the life of the faithful will likely come about through many "holy conversations" among the People of God. However, the notion of the People of God, having itself undergone a new understanding at Vatican II, no longer is restricted to that of a Judeo-Christian historical and philosophical narrative. The focus of the gospel in the present age is that God is

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[16] *Radical Love*, (p. xi).

redemptively present in humanity's making of itself. Humanity is never *not* in the presence of God. However, many individuals may not be conscious of this philosophical understanding of their coming to be as persons. Phenomenologically, humanity appears as God's covenanted faithful as the story is told in the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8 ff). Biblical terminology notwithstanding, Baum notes that the message of God's presence to humanity today may "be expressed in ordinary, non-religious secular language" as well as religious language. [17]

The re-interpretation of the "Good News" of the gospel is that humans participate in God's presence in their life. This is a significant advancement over the idea that there is a God in heaven who is solely in charge of everything. This advancement is realized phenomenologically when believers fashion their earthly affairs by virtue of their status as independent creatures of God. As *Gaudium et Spes* acknowledges:

> If by autonomy of earthly affairs is meant the gradual discovery, utilization and ordering of the laws and values of matter and society, then the demand for autonomy is perfectly in order: it is at once the claim of humankind today and the desire of the creator. By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws. [18]

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[17] *Faith and Doctrine,* (1969:110).
[18] Flannery, (1996:201) *Gaudium et Spes*, (para. 36).

Baum addresses this question of earthly autonomy, which I hold includes the formulation of doctrine and dogma, in light of humanity's capacity to direct its own intellectual future.

> When the Church enters a new cultural age, a doctrinal development takes place that is not simply the derivation of new insights from traditional teaching, not simply a passage from the implicit to the explicit. What occurs is a doctrinal shift. Re-focusing the Gospel as the Good News for the new age and re-interpreting the Church's teaching in the light of it, produces a reformulation of doctrine, in fidelity to the apostolic witness, that deals with the relevant issues of the present and uses concepts and language drawn from contemporary culture. [19]

Conscious experience guides the process of an individual in determining the future of the spiritual or religious life. Reflectively conscious personal experience is a quality found only in human experience. The brute and "intelligent" machines are exempt of any such experience. While infrahuman life may be conscious according to its own organic specificity, there is no evidence that it is capable of self-reflection. That is, do dogs know that they are dogs and cats know that they are cats in relation to other organisms?

Given the evolutionary character of the spiritual life what is an

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[19] *Faith and Doctrine:* (1969:118). Baum's "in fidelity to the apostolic witness" does not mean adhering to the concept of apostolic teaching as static and fixed.

impossibility is that Catholic theologians can demand a re-interpretation of the church's teaching and *at the same time* insist on the static nature of the Gospel inherited by the faithful. This misunderstanding leads to a contradiction that impedes spiritual and religious growth. [20] The gospel, as a product of the church's teaching, will ultimately have to be philosophically reassessed as a means of the revelation of God's word. In other words, what does the "good news" say about God to the faithful today?

From a biblical perspective, doctrine is the church's witness to God's self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. In history, institutions do not precede life. They are constituted, reformed and eventually die. The constitutions of many contemporary institutions, unlike traditional institutions, correspond to a new self-understanding of the human experience. Thus, no one social institution encompasses the whole church. As referenced above the Church is a holistic phenomenon that is greater and other than its visible parts. Contrary to what some theologians have suggested, traditional churches will not disintegrate or disappear as Charles Davis thought. [21] The

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[20] Flannery (1996:270) *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 82 notes the same phenomenon in the civil realm. "Governments, who are at once the guardians of their own people and the promoters of the welfare of the whole world, rely to a large extent on public opinion and public attitudes. Their peace-making efforts will be in vain, as long as people are divided and at odds with each other because of hostility, contempt and distrust, or because of racial hatred and ideological obduracy."

[21] Davis wrote: "The new consciousness is in fact the death warrant for all fixed hierarchical orders. It has already seen the death of Christendom and is now steadily bringing about the disintegration of the Church in its present form." *A Question of Conscience*, (1967:199).

traditional hierarchical church remains in place alongside other forms of the Church in secularized society. In light of a new conscious self-understanding of the faithful, there has been a change in the constitutions of the churches. The experience of many of the contemporary faithful is that traditional church communities are irrelevant in meeting the needs those seeking meaning in life. Meaning will be found, or better, meaning will be assigned by the faithful with their new self-consciousness to small, but related, ancillary communities with no one community recognized as normative and universal. Within this new self-consciousness, life is not recognized as socially exclusive, that is, aristocratic; but is disclosed as democratic, that is, characterized by the absence of political class distinctions or aristocratic privilege.

Vatican II enacted four constitutions on the Church, one dogmatic, one pastoral, one on liturgy and one on revelation. But no political constitution since, "Christ did not bequeath to the church a mission in the political, economic, or social order: the purpose he assigned to it was religious." [22] While emotionally significant and spiritually helpful the pastoral perspective often lacks any serious attention to the doctrinal formulations of the community of believers in the new cultural matrix. Many of the church's contemporary theologians

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[22] *Gaudium et Spes* (para. 42:210). In the same paragraph the Constitution notes: "By its nature and mission the church is universal in that it is not committed to any one culture or to any political, economic or social system." One might argue that the "politics of salvation" is dispersed throughout the Council's documents.

maintain the distinction between the mystical (heavenly) body of Christ and the corporate body of Christ. In the mystical body, a metaphysical body that transcends the physical, one does not succumb to the sexual appetites of the flesh evident within the physical, that is, the temporal body. [23] This distinction leads to a great number of contradictory theological ideologies about sexuality in Christian churches. The variety of these theological interpretations, within the traditional churches, often shows minimal acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals who believed that the established churches must include them. Many religious LGBTQ+ individuals believe that there is a spiritual aspect to their sexuality which, if ignored, threatens their existence as emotionally and physically healthy individuals.

Western civil society is still witnessing the dissolution of traditional male only social clubs. This dissolution opens up structured public spaces in civil society for the appearance of novel sexual groupings which extends beyond the heterosexual matrix. As many gay activists have indicated in the past, the challenge is now for traditional churches to follow suit and become public spaces where LGTBQ+ issues can be freely and honestly discussed. Such public structuring, when successful, would provide an alternative experience to many "closed" family and religious structures in which gay individuals often have no support. As noted earlier, the

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[23] Matthew 22:23-30.

groups calling for inclusive LGTBQ+ structures, need not be religious. They have their allies. They may be strictly secular and orientated to human friendship, or human growth and worth. In the Western cultural context, those seeking to establish secular communities of human friendship and worth are likely to rely on experience and reason, and those seeking to found a monotheistic religious community will necessarily rely on the revelation found in scripture and tradition. The latter will rely on an understanding of God's will for the individual, and on the faithful constituting their communities be they Jewish, Christian or Muslim.

To my mind, the question of being a Church or being a Gay Religious Community with respect to LGBTQ+ theological status remains undecided. Since LGBTQ+ individuals face threatening issues similar to that of racial oppression within the experience of sexuality, there are further societal questions to be asked such as: Is God revealing new truths in the re-formalizing of culture? What criteria do we use to validate another's experience in community? Can we, in fact, actually validate another's experience? The extended quote from *Holy Conversations* below sets these yet-to-be-answered questions in an historical context of traditional Christian social and doctrinal development.

> Christianity has an enormous legacy of tradition. In the first century, Christian tradition was one small aspect of Jewish tradition. As this Jewish-Christian movement spread to differing towns and cities, tradition evolved through the

varying practices of the evangelists and and the stories told about Jesus and his followers. These stories spread through accounts that were eventually included in the official canon of the Bible, like the Gospel of Mark and Luke-Acts stories. Evangelists also taught about Jesus through accounts that were later excluded from the Bible, like the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and the Gospel of Thomas. After the Emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as an official religion in the Roman Empire (386 c.e.), Christian tradition continued to spread and grow at a more rapid pace in the ancient Mediterranean and North African world. Among ancient Christians, traditions concerned with institutionalizing the church increased and were added to the traditions of the early church movement previously persecuted by the Roman state. Centuries later, medieval European church traditions, which included monastic life as well as crusades killing Muslims and Jews, multiplied. At the same time, more entrenched organizational traditions continued to grow in Jerusalem and Rome. Many variations of Christian tradition grew out of the European Protestant Reformation movement in the 1500s and evolved through Christianity's role in the African slave trade.

From about the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onward, Christian tradition in the Americas again encompassed diverse forms, with a range including Puritan, Quaker, and

Catholic beliefs. Here the major currents of Christian tradition encompassed justifications for the rape and genocide of indigenous Native peoples together with the theft of their land, as well as for the system of chattel slavery for African Americans. It also included conflicts about baptism, witchcraft, and the disposition of the soul after death. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries certain understandings of Christian tradition were launched from the United States through missionary movements among people in Asia and Africa. Christian tradition evolved through interactions with varied cultural traditions that the missionaries encountered in each context. Today Christian tradition is defined by Catholic and Orthodox church doctrine and polity of hundreds of Protestant denominations and independent church organizations throughout the world. It is expressed in the behavior of millions of ordinary Christians worldwide who give witness to the Christian faith in their daily lives.

For Jesus, tradition was something he came to fulfill through his mission and ministry. When starting out, Jesus announced to his own Jewish community that the prophetic scriptural tradition about God's promise to send someone to liberate the oppressed was fulfilled on that day (Luke 4: 16 - 22). Tradition was also something that he came to interpret. Jesus rebuked religious leaders for being concerned about

how his disciples broke with tradition, saying to them, "For the sake of tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (Matt. 15:6-9). The religious authorities persecuted Jesus for behavior that violated the official understandings of tradition. After he violated tradition by healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, the leaders 'immediately' conspired against him in order to figure out how 'to destroy him' (Mark 3:6).[24]

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[24] Oliveto, K. P. *et al* (2005:93). *Holy Conversations.*

AN OBSERVATION:

THE METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH

In this section I present my perspective and appraisal of publicly posted information of the Metropolitan Community Church as a social phenomenon evident in present day culture. There has been no direct communication with any of the MCC communities in this appraisal. Most of my initial philosophical observations about the constitution of the MCC were made in consultations with other religious philosophers and theologians earlier, prior to the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web. These two new phenomena are literally universal in contemporary Western society, and have no doubt heightened the consciousness of the general population to the existence of the MCC. They are the major sources of my information concerning the MCC.

Given that the MCC evolved out of mainstream religious culture dominant in North American before the advent of the Internet and WWW, as with the established churches, MCC history has been uploaded to these public sources. As a presence in the Internet, as well as maintaining a physical location, the MCC appears to be a growing community, and social movement in light of an increasing number of LGTBQ+ individuals "coming out" into the public square. Besides LGTBQ+ individuals the MCC clearly attracts other minorities to its community. Given its appearance in the world of

techno-digital culture, philosophers and sociologists may legitimately ask if the MCC does not offer a degree of romantic nostalgia for those marginalized individuals who grew up in, but subsequently left behind, traditional organized religion. An answer may lie somewhere within these pages. As a fringe social phenomenon (which it appears to be at the moment) the MCC is a creative and growing religious community. I hope to address, to a minimal level of philosophical satisfaction, this phenomenon in the observations that follow.

The MCC, as it appears to me, seeks to establish itself as a stable and permanent institution in contemporary society. In doing this it reflects a change in the traditional normative culture and in religious belief systems. Corporately, God remains an unidentified agent within the MCC. And indeed, it appears that God is not required to be an agent at all from the perspective of some MCC mission statements. The kind of community it reflects appears capable of absorbing elements of the former religious communities of LGBTQ+ members, but any degree of traditional orthodoxy that is retained is doubtful. From a traditional perspective, the MCC communities appear to be characterized as a collection of sects. That is to say the MCC is composed of small groups who aspire to personal inward perfection. Sects usually renounce any intent of dominating the world. The societal goal of the MCC is to act as an influential agent without being a dominating force. Understood in this way, the MCC community conforms to Ernst Troeltsch's

definition: "The sect, therefore, does not educate nations in the mass, but it gathers a select group of the elect, and places it in sharp opposition to the world." [25] These observations of a sociological nature are evident when the MCC is observed and evaluated from a phenomenological philosophical perspective.

In light of the human evolutionary process, present humanity appears to be evolving towards a stage of posthumanity that will engage individuals more deeply in an autonomous intellectual culture. An autonomous intellectual culture is evolving and produces societal differences within itself; it does not produce similarities. The particular question then becomes: Where does the MCC fit in to contemporary culture at large? As a community of like-minded individuals, members of the MCC appear to be conscious of how their experiences have affected them. They have distinguished where differences exist among themselves and among other Christians with regard to the understanding of sexuality. On a personal level, many members of the MCC are sensitive to a status that is not recognized by all social commentators, or religious and civil legislators. This is a recurring concern evident in the personal testimonies of LGBTQ+ individuals that any serious review of gay literature will confirm. Though some change in favour of LGBTQ+ presence in the public forum is evident.

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[25] "Church and Sect." Ernst Troeltsch in *The Theories of Society*, Vol. I (1961:664).

The MCC cannot exclude traces of its traditional religious past. Positively, these traces of the past provide a way of coherence for some LGTBQ+ individuals. Therefore, the MCC provides for many various options within its organizational structure to ensure coherence of the religious life for its members, regardless of their divergent backgrounds. These options include tolerating various perspectives in the traditional Christian doctrines, i.e., creation, immortality of the soul, the acceptance of a corporate Creed, or its equivalent, etc. To be noted is that a personal statement of faith is not a replacement for a corporate (public) Creed. That being the case, it appears that the members of an MCC congregation would be hard pressed to gather as a body of united Christians professing one unifying faith. However, the MCC community's self-understanding as a social phenomenon may be authentically expressed in the phrase "unity in diversity."

The official administration and most membership of traditional churches see the MCC as deviant, but the MCC does not see itself that way. Their view arises from the failure of the established churches to understand the issues of MCC members. They are not deviating from human sexuality but rather showing a different way of being sexually human. When it comes to pastoral care, the classical doctrine of heterosexuality dominates the approach to LGBTQ+ individuals in many of the established churches. That is love the sinner, hate the sin. Having been recognized as providing a particular and appropriate form of pastoral care for their members

the MCC communities appear to be gaining acceptance as a socially grounded (phenomenological) institution. That is, the MCC offers its members new and unconventional life-affirming options within their religious experience. Ironically, these unconventional life-affirming options have begun to appear as a normative cultural phenomenon for a specific type of personality, i.e., a queer personality, and this has attracted the attention of many philosophers.

Phenomenological philosophy, which is the method of interpretation for my observations, has no polemical purpose in justifying itself with respect to correct interpretation. Its agenda or goal is not set in advance. In fact, I set the purpose in my interpretation and I am solely responsible for my phenomenological conclusions since I undertake this investigation as an amateur and not as a professional academic philosopher. I maintain that any competent critical thinker can be a philosopher about personal values in life. For example, an LGTBQ+ individual may have opinions and ideas about effecting doctrinal or pastoral changes in Christian theology without being an accredited theologian. Religiously inclined LGTBQ+ individuals can undertake a project of "queering" the dialogue between God's word and the believer's response resulting in new studies and interpretations if Katherine Johnson's manifesto on queer sexuality is any guide.

> 'Queer' had long been used as a term of insult for lesbians
> and gay men, but by the late 1980s it was undergoing a

reappropriation within 'queer cultures.' Of central importance was the socio-political context of the HIV/AIDS crisis that was sweeping though queer communities against a political landscape of a growing conservatism. Thus in similar conditions to those that underpinned the paradigmatic shift within sexuality studies created by Mary McIntosh's 'Homosexual role,' the explosion of queer studies entailed asking new types of questions, or finding a new place to begin. [26]

Thus, the MCC discloses a community that believes in living theologically "beyond confessional boundaries" when asking new types of questions. The MCC as a social organization discloses a beginning, but does it disclose an end. There is no teleological goal to the existence of the MCC as a contemporary societal phenomenon. It is a dynamic, undetermined and open-ended existential phenomenon.

The creation of any dominant ideology is often held by many LGTBQ+ individuals to be somewhat of a social pathology since it is rooted in a fixed point of view that often excludes their experience. They consider this exclusion an aberration. I suspect that for many MCC members the dominant heterosexual ideology appears counter-productive in establishing social freedom and personal growth for LGTBQ+ individuals. The ambiguity of sexual

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[26] *Sexuality a Psychosocial Manifesto*, (2015:87).

identity and the heterodoxy of personal beliefs causes some philosophers to wonder if a hidden and unconscious ideology of extreme "anti-straight" is lurking within MCC communities. This anti-straight ideology challenges the credibility of the established churches. The credibility of churches today requires human reasons (as opposed to divine reasons only) for Christians to retain their beliefs. Divine authority plays an increasingly minor role in persuading the faithful to believe. Thus, a perceived danger to the faith, as recognized by classically-minded Christians, is that traditional (and apparently necessary) Christian beliefs are being reduced to a modern philosophical humanism characteristic of atheism. [27] Renaissance humanism, however, is not to be confused with modern secular humanism. Renaissance humanism reflects a revival in the culture of the ancient world that did not focus exclusively on religion and divinity, but rather on society and the nature of human beings in society. To my mind it is this view, not modern scientific humanism, that can be supportive of LGTBQ+ individuals.

In light of the public descriptions of MCC communities, I wonder if the members are not, in fact, re-interpreting the classical notion of

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[27] As *Gaudium et Spes* (para. 20) notes: "Modern atheism often takes a systematic form. … For those who profess atheism of this kind freedom means that humanity constitutes its own end and is the sole maker, in total control, of its own history. … The sense of power which modern technical progress produces in people may encourage this outlook." Flannery, *Vatican II* (1996:182).

God? The MCC, in interpreting the notion of God, appears to me as an example of the existential phenomenon known as the "restless church" described by Gregory Baum. He lists the criteria to define a restless church from an existential philosophical perspective. While not denying the role of revelation in constituting the church, revelation is definitely a secondary concern in his understanding. Baum's criteria, to my mind, provide ample food for thought for LGTBQ+ Christians.

- Criterion # 1.

  Human beings are *listeners* to other human listeners who are not necessarily *knowers* of other human beings.   "Saying that man is a listener is different from saying that he is a knower. When man is called a knower then his vis-à-vis is truth, possibly abstract, impersonal truth. When man is called a listener then his vis-à-vis is always a person." I suggest that humanity, regardless of sexual orientation, both listens to God and knows creation.

- Criterion # 2.

  The personal constitution of humanity is dialogical. Humans become persons through dialogue with other humans. "Man is forever led into new situations, he listens to a summons that does not come from himself and by responding to it he determines his existence as a person." The novel truth of this insight is that humanity is a co-creator in the presence of the universal creator God. Humanity reflexively "summons"

itself to higher ideals and values.

- Criterion # 3.

Humanity grows through a process of conversions. Humanity is not a static essence fated to endure life through time. Rather, "wherever people are, they are summoned to growth, to leave their childish past behind, and to assume greater responsibility for themselves and for their environment." Thanks to the proliferation of social media the conscious need to assume greater personal responsibility is becoming increasingly evident.

- Criterion # 4.

Humanity is in need of community to become itself. "What is true of early childhood is true of later life. Man needs the community to fulfill his destiny. Without the help of his brothers, and ultimately the whole human family, man cannot exercise his divine vocation of reconciling and humanizing life on earth." The implication is that LGTBQ+ individuals require the assistance of their own particular community.

- Criterion # 5.

Human ecclesial life is constantly threatened by external and internal forces making it a restless church plagued by doubt. "Man is threatened by the outer and inner situation of his life to become unfaithful to the divine call of becoming truly

human." The theological lesson to be learned here is that humanity, since the Fall, begins an inadequately human, life-long and seemingly ageless journey to complete the project of achieving full human status. Historically, from a global perspective God appears more often as an absentee, than a present support. [28]

Clearly this understanding of a restless church, with appropriate adaptation, can describe the values of the MCC as a community open to all Christians, gay or straight. As I understand it at the present time, the MCC presents itself as a new religious and political phenomenon in Western society in the throes of being born in the context of identity politics. Such a development is, in fact, not new. New religious phenomena occur within classical Christianity which mirror the changes in civil and ecclesiastical society from one evolutionary stage to another in human history. This leads me to wonder if the MCC communities truly reflect *a common world of meaning*, or do they engage in the *creative disaffiliation* as a community of which Harvey Cox has spoken? [29]

The loss of credibility, suffered by many traditional religious systems within Western society, has spurred a renewal of personal

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[28] Cf. *Credibility of the Church Today*, (1968:182-192).
[29] Cox, Harvey (1967:201), *The Secular City*.

self-understanding as these religious communities are re-evaluated and re-structured. The negative experiences of the past, having been rejected, has given rise to a new, more positive re-structuring of sexual relationships with re-interpretations of religious dogmas, doctrines and laws with LGBTQ+ individuals in mind. This re-structuring may be observed in the context of the present day from a phenomenological perspective (and possibly more accurately) than from a classical perspective. In my point of view, Western humanity is becoming less supportive of classical philosophy and more *avant-garde* in its contemporary self-understanding. In the modern world people live through a diversity of institutions and are subject to many influences. Societal structures do not exist apart from people and their attitudes must be taken into account in re-structuring religious systems. The assessment of the purpose of institutions in society, and the assessment of the purpose of Christian ministry in life has brought about a change in the contemporary philosophical perspective of religion in the public square.

Traditional religious structures have discriminated against LGTBQ+ individuals and often fail to embody Christian truth and values according to the MCC. It appears, however, that the MCC community has retained traces of its classical origins in its polity. As a religious philosopher, I wonder if it can sustain this status as Western society continues to embrace an increasingly secular future. The techno-digital sciences, apparently lacking a need for any sort

of overt divinity, is a legitimate worry for all religious institutions as to their theological sustainability in the public eye. A larger question for all churches and Christian communities, queer and straight, is: are they able to be a sign of faith, hope and love in a posthuman world? Indeed, will they even be accepted in a posthuman world? To be an accepted sign of faith, hope and love in a posthuman world, it appears to me that personal consciousness, expressed individually and collectively, will establish new structures of community, rather than simply reform ancient and antecedent structures. It will be a positive experience for those LGBTQ+ individuals involved in this enterprise. As an additional institutional Christian presence in the world today, the MCC is accommodating an emerging new pattern of sexual and personal relationships. In every period of Christian history, the churches, synagogues and mosques have tried to find appropriate social embodiments. A critical review of history suggests that the Constantinian model of the church (structured as a sacred entity) need not be taken as exclusively normative today for the faithful.

The notion of the sacred is not merely a transcendent cultural phenomenon inherited as a legacy hovering in the background of humanity's consciousness. That which is sacred is disclosed through humanity's maturing consciousness. A maturing consciousness brings about a societal change in the structure of religious communities in the service of LGTBQ+ individuals and humanitarian needs. The MCC, as a contemporary societal

phenomenon, appears to fit this description.

THE MCC PHENOMENOLOGICALLY UNDERSTOOD

The phenomenological approach

I offer my understanding from a phenomenological perspective which is probably still somewhat unfamiliar to many Western philosophers. Phenomenology is a subjective method of interpretation which has been in use by philosophers, social scientists and theologians throughout history. Although it was brought into prominence in the 20th century through the German school of philosophy. It is a method that focuses on the consciousness of what a person observes in life. To be critically conscious a person must be conscious of some "thing," some object i.e., a living organism, a non-living thing, an artificial object manufactured by human hands, an idea and or notion of the mind, etc. In all cases the observed, which is of significance to the observer, is subjectively interpreted, including the observation of the observer's own actions. In this chapter I appraise the Metropolitan Community Church as a religious institution through documentation available from the various branches of the MCC community and freely accessible on the World Wide Web. I interpret these documents collectively, that is, summarily, as if they disclose a single phenomenon. My intention is not to replace the traditional epistemology of religious interpretation, but to attain to a heightened consciousness of the religious existence and ontological understanding of the MCC as disclosed through phenomenological

THE MCC PHENOMENOLOGICALLY UNDERSTOOD

The phenomenological approach

I offer my understanding from a phenomenological perspective which is probably still somewhat unfamiliar to many Western philosophers. Phenomenology is a subjective method of interpretation which has been in use by philosophers, social scientists and theologians throughout history. Although it was brought into prominence in the 20th century through the German school of philosophy. It is a method that focuses on the consciousness of what a person observes in life. To be critically conscious a person must be conscious of some "thing," some object i.e., a living organism, a non-living thing, an artificial object manufactured by human hands, an idea and or notion of the mind, etc. In all cases the observed, which is of significance to the observer, is subjectively interpreted, including the observation of the observer's own actions. In this chapter I appraise the Metropolitan Community Church as a religious institution through documentation available from the various branches of the MCC community and freely accessible on the World Wide Web. I interpret these documents collectively, that is, summarily, as if they disclose a single phenomenon. My intention is not to replace the traditional epistemology of religious interpretation, but to attain to a heightened consciousness of the religious existence and ontological understanding of the MCC as disclosed through phenomenological

philosophy. In short, the phenomenological method is not the diametric opposite of the epistemological; it is a more comprehensive one than the latter, whose merits it preserves and whose inadequacies it tries to remedy. [30] The phenomenological method, as I employ it here, presumes three distinct principles of human existence. One, human subjectivity and objectivity are distinguishable, but not separable, in human intellectual (mental) activity. They occur as simultaneous aspects of human observation and experience. An object that is observed as beyond one's mind is "out there" (i.e., objectively) and *at the same time* it is "interpreted within" one's mind (i.e., subjectively). Two, subjectivity and objectivity are foundational to human intellectual life and Western philosophy. Three, the phenomenological method of interpretation presupposes the primordial unity of the observer out of which the consciousness of objectivity and subjectivity has evolved as the distinctive intellectual viewpoints of a philosophical perspective. Contrary to much contemporary (erroneous) expectation, computers, not being alive, cannot think objectively or subjectively. They simply compute.

A phenomenological appraisal of religious texts

Religious texts, print or digital, present an object "out there" to be observed for phenomenological study. In this work I focus on the digital texts only (freely available on the internet) and relate them to

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[30] Cf. Dewart, Leslie. *The Evolution of Consciousness*, (1989:31).

the MCC in forming an appraisal of the community as a social phenomenon. That is to say, it is the self-description of the MCC communities, presumably supplied in good faith, upon which I base my assessment. Further, it is to be noted that the self-description, which forms the common ground for all interpreters, is subject to evolutionary change.

My appraisal of the MCC relies on the acceptability and credibility of a reader-centred critical methodology. That is, no actual participation in a MMC community is required, but simply the intellectual ability to comprehend the public literature describing the MCC is sufficient to determine the intended purpose of the community. The intended purpose, i.e., the societal realization of the community, must be intersubjectively evident to be credible. Since intersubjectivity is fluid, my appraisal is subject to critique by philosophers,

Generally, the self-descriptive literature of the MCC expresses the convictions of the authors at the particular moment of writing. Thus, the descriptions are presented from a perspective of conviction, that is, by members who are expressing their immediate personal experience and committing it to a written form. Thus, these descriptions most likely will change as the experience of the MCC membership evolves. The authors narrate their experience from a personal point of view which amounts to an inducement (or testimonial) encouraging the reader to experience, as a true social

phenomenon, what is described in the literature.

The social value of the MCC

The following interpretation results from my musing on what I perceive to be the overall social value of the MCC as a religious phenomenon in contemporary Western culture. As noted earlier, this is particularly significant in light of the advent of the Internet and World Wide Web through which the community's values are largely communicated.

The MCC network began as a fellowship of churches. The fellowship does not require any founding individual in the sense of an iconic historical personality whose experience is perpetually necessary and integral to the community. Members are free to bring their own understanding of a prophetic or divine personality to the community who may have uniquely inspired them to join the MCC. Each church is linked to the other through affiliation as an open and inclusive body. The MCC appears constituted by a collection of individuals, not appearing comfortable in mainline churches, who want to belong somewhere. There is a perceived promise that each unique individual can maintain a personal identity amid a collection of differing identities.

MCC churches offer an experience of Christianity and religious belief which celebrates God's diverse multicultural creativity. Understood phenomenologically as a social value subject to

evolution, the MCC may be recognized via the "restless church" syndrome as noted above. As a restless church the MCC is a positive and dynamic concept, whose members are prepared to listen to each other, seemingly knowing that each member lacks something the other may possess. Members come to experience their truth of experience through a dialogue with others in the community. Should personal growth occur among the members, it occurs through a process of confirming personal conversions as part of God's saving creativity. God's saving creativity, or agency, is perceived as a remedy for the external and internal threats to a person that impede the personal development of the individual as well as the community. It is through their participation in the community that MCC adherents hope to become truly themselves.

From its inception, the MCC acknowledged the co-existence and necessary relationship of sexuality and spirituality. In the minds of its members this insight requires interpreting philosophy and theology in a new key, that is, from a queer perspective. An assumption that most likely needs to be re-evaluated is that straight people are the exclusive originators and custodians of a philosophy and theology that determines what it means to be queer and spiritual in contemporary society. A new understanding of a queer church, outside the norms of the traditional churches, along with the participation of LGBTQ+ individuals, is in formation. However, it must be remembered that no two theologians, gay or straight, propose their world views identically in bringing the message of

God's love to homosexual persons. The message of the MCC is a message of love that identifies these churches as communities reaching beyond traditional confessional boundaries. As social phenomena, constituting differences notwithstanding, there appears to be no recognition of "insiders" or "outsiders" within MCC churches. This observation, which has an identifiable historical and sociological beginning, continues to evolve as an institutional community which appears to have no defined end in sight as to where its evolution will lead.

Further, continuing expansion has established MCC communities in a variety of countries and cultures in which their particular devotion to human rights and justice extends the gospel message into the issues of human sexuality, gender identity, race, poverty, and more. Since its founding in 1968, the MCC has been at the vanguard of civil and human rights movements by addressing important issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and other forms of oppression. MCC has been on the forefront in the struggle towards marriage equality in the US and other countries worldwide and continues to be a powerful voice in the LGBTQ+ equality movement. Herein lies its value as a contemporary social phenomenon.

Each Metropolitan Community Church is locally founded, locally governed and locally supported. Such jurisprudence allows the local congregation to form its own government according to the desire of

its adherents. This results in a great degree of flexibility in adapting to change as the local culture evolves. However, while congregations determine their own bylaws and governance, they receive guidance from the denominational offices of the International General Conference. This guidance presumes some understanding of a "common world of meaning" to which each congregation adheres, thus preventing them from becoming sociological fringe phenomena without a larger identity. That is, the International General Conference prevents MCC communities from becoming localized sects. And they are thus prevented from generating "creative disaffiliation" as a negative ideology within their congregations. Rather, a positive experience will most likely be experienced. As Charles Davis has noted:

> What creative disaffiliation will involve for the individual will depend upon his personal understanding and situation. For an increasing number it will mean a renunciation of their denominational membership. For others it need not do so. They will find sufficient freedom and scope for honest and sincere Christian living and mission within formal membership of their Church. The renewal and reorganization of the Christian Church will be achieved by people working from either direction, from without as well as from within the present Church structures. [31]

The process of creative disaffiliation as disclosed by MCC polity

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[31] *A Question of Conscience*, (1967:238).

affirms the MCC communities as societal phenomena that embrace the overall core values of its members.

"The MCC denominational offices, the administrative and spiritual arm of our collective fellowship, maintains global ministries, programs and missions" according to an internet posting. From my philosophical perspective this sounds like a statement that could apply to any hierarchical church or ecclesiastical community. Since the MCC is not allied with any civil corporate political affiliation, it does not reflect the political legacy of the Constantinian church of Western history. The Board of Elders, the elected denominational leaders, provide particular communities with both spiritual and administrative guidance for a healthy church life and growth within local settings. The governing structure of the MCC is not patterned after any outside authority. In this sense it appears, potentially at least, that the MCC is a harbinger of what the future may look like regarding all voluntary ecclesial communities.

The Metropolitan Community Church is distinguished by an unfinished calling and a prophetic destiny. To meet this calling and destiny, Harvey Cox suggests a "theology of social change" is needed with contemporary churches. He explains:

> This means that the church must respond constantly to social change, but it is hampered from doing so by doctrines of the church deriving from the frayed-out period of classical Christendom and infected with the ideology of preservation

and permanence. They are almost entirely past-oriented, taking their authority from one or another classical period, from an alleged resemblance to some earlier form of church life, or from a theory of historical continuity. But this will no longer do. A church whose life is defined and shaped by what God is *now* doing in the world cannot be imprisoned in such antiquated specifications. [32]

It appears that members of the MCC communities recognize that changes in their communities and in themselves are the result of some agency whose purpose is still in progress. The question arises, then, does being characterized by an unfinished calling and a prophetic destiny place the MCC within the traditional understanding of the Christian vocation as being fulfilled in Christ? It appears that the MCC does not accept exclusively the Christian understanding that "the most intimate truth thus revealed about God and human salvation shines forth for us in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and *the sum total of revelation*" [my italics]. [33]

The MCC claims: "We are a global movement of spiritually and sexually diverse people who are fully awake to God's enduring love." In its missionary viewpoint the MCC appears to be signaling a doctrinal and pastoral shift in the approach to the spiritual life of

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[32] *The Secular City*, (p. 91). Cox's italics.
[33] *Dei Verbum* (para. 2) in Flannery *Vatican II* (1996:98). According to John 21:25 the written gospels are far from exhaustive. They contain only a fraction of Christ's life.

its adherents. Following the example of Jesus (often carried beyond the degree to which it is actually known), and empowered by the Spirit, MCC members seek to build leading-edge church communities that demand, proclaim, and live out social justice in the world. As leading-edge communities the MCC appears to present to the world new religious structures founded upon a different pattern of organization (non-Constantinian). As new social phenomena these churches appear to be generated as a result of the failure of the traditional churches to guide and restructure their communities for the benefit and accommodation of queer individuals and other social minorities. Historical evidence in every period of Christian history discloses a degree of failure in the traditional churches to meet needs of some of their faithful thus provoking a new and appropriate form of social embodiment. A new social embodiment, or phenomenon, seems to result from a queering of the dialogue between God's word and God's faithful.

Particular MCC communities

Particular MCC communities transform themselves and at the same time as they envision transforming the world. But what kind of global society do they envision? Is it one that is in continuity with a traditional past? It appears to be more like one that has evolved away from a traditional past. One might speculate that the values the MCC espouse have been influenced, if not absorbed, from a former culture by the founding individuals of the MCC. Is it sufficiently evident that the core values of the MCC reflect a creative church such that

it is a church and not a sect? (As I have noted above.) It proclaims and practices a spirituality that is anchored in the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ and confronts the issues of our volatile, uncertain, and complex world. These latter conditions, volatility, uncertainty, and complexity are core characteristics of our contemporary Western world. Does the societal evidence, as phenomenologically interpreted, indicate that the adherents of the MCC are sufficiently mature to establish a sustainable contemporary ecclesiology? Only time will tell.

The MCC recognizes itself as called to develop and equip leaders, congregations, and ministries to foster spiritual growth, do the work of justice, act with compassion, and integrate sexuality and spirituality. They purport to do this through offering high-value training, local church support and resourcing, cutting edge theological exploration, and expanding partnerships. Save for the unique integration of sexuality and spirituality, it may be argued that the preceding values have evolved out of mainstream ecclesiastical understanding. Further, within a growing techno-digital world-wide culture, with its attendant dehumanization, is it likely that MCC adherents may "backslide" and show a pining for a more nostalgic era of classical Christendom. Again, only the future will tell.

Some core values of the MCC communities

Inclusion: God's love of all is of great moral significance in resisting the practice of exclusion in the ministry of the MCC. These

communities want to be conduits of faith where everyone is included in the family of God, and where all are welcomed at God's table. It appears that which is sacred is not a mere transcendent ideal inherited from a mythic and legendary past lurking in the background of MCC's contemporary understanding of ethics. Inclusion, which is active love, is sacred and embraces more than a simple respect for others within the human family. Inclusion, as an act of human love, has a transcendent value in itself for the MCC.

Community: The MCC offers a safe and open community for people to worship, learn, and grow in their faith. It is committed to equipping its members to do the work that God has called them to do in the world. Their members overwhelmingly interpret God in a Judeo-Christian sense coming as they do from traditional Christian churches. But alternative minority interpretations are growing conspicuously within some MCC communities, i.e., Islam or atheistic philosophy. A speculative question arises within this diverse community arrangement: can the MCC maintain its credibility as an effective religious community while tolerating all sacred and secular values as ostensibly equal? Once more, only time will tell.

Spiritual Transformation: Announcing the message of spiritual liberation from an oppressive religious system is what guides the MCC ministry. They believe that when people are invited to experience God through the life and ministry of Christ, individual

lives will be transformed. (For many people true transformation in Christ is not simply an experience of a conversion process from one denomination to another. It is a personal metanoia resulting in a new experience of the world and oneself.) However, even given their personal metanoia, MCC members cannot totally jettison traces of their philosophical and theological past. Traces of their philosophical and theological past provide the foundations for an alternative understanding of their spiritual transformation. Further, the spiritual transformation of MCC adherents is a sign intended to influence the rest of the world, without proselytizing them. Their purpose is to queer society, without force, in witnessing to anti-conformity and anti-traditional societal perspectives. While there is evidence of the retention of some traditional Christian doctrines in the MCC, i.e., creation, immortality of the soul, etc., I am aware of no evidence of a formal Creed or equivalent. Spiritual transformation is a subjective and individual process.

Justice: The MCC tends to work more (i.e., witness more) and to talk less, (i.e., theologize less) as it were than conventional churches. They are committed to resisting the structures that oppress people by standing alongside those who suffer under the weight of oppressive systems, and being guided always by their commitment to Global Human Rights. This further characterizes the MCC as a "restless church" community, it seems to me, who are not satisfied with the *status quo*. Such restlessness also suggests that the MCC is a Christian congregational body fashioning a new political and

social reality without a Constantinian type of history. In this sense the MCC is coming into existence in a truly modern sense. Ordination (professional ministry) in the MCC reflects a biblical model of inauguration as the 2020 *Clergy Manual* attests. [34] Historically, the early Christian community reflected this status, prior to the Constantinian recognition and incorporation of the sect into the Emperor's political apparatus. That is to say that the MCC mirrors ancient Judeo-Christian roots and values which sought change in the civil and political society of the day.

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[34] In the New Testament book of Acts, we learn that Paul and Barnabas ordained leaders for each congregation, praying for them and committing them to God's service. 1 In the Hebrew Bible, Moses is told to anoint, ordain and consecrate priests. 2 Throughout the bible we read of people answering a call to ordained ministry and being commissioned to serve the community in the name of God. Answering the vocational call to ordained ministry in Metropolitan Community Churches is a lengthy and courageous process. One discerns within oneself such a calling, and then seeks guidance in testing and having that call confirmed. Periods of spiritual formation, psychological testing, theological education, and practical training bring one finally to a place where the larger "body" says that one is fully prepared to enter into the life of professional ministry. https://ofld.mccchurch.org/download/manualsprotocols/MCC-Clergy-Manual-2020.pdf

A PERSONAL QUEER STORY

Introduction

In this chapter I draw upon edited excerpts from "The Lord Is My Shepherd, And He Knows I'm Gay" authored by MCC Founder and Moderator, Rev. Troy D. Perry, as well as other sources. [35] His personal narrative, in written form, is a document susceptible to appraisal through phenomenological interpretation. [36] Some of my criteria for this interpretation are, 1) that in the reading experience of the reader the text becomes real, 2) that the narrative content of a text is the common ground for all readers/interpreters, 3) that the references in the text stimulate the reader's memory of similar and not-so-similar experiences, 4) that the sole source for the narrative is the thought of the author which is expressed in the language used by the author, 5) that it is only through exploring the possibilities of the author's assignment of meaning to the text that the discovery of personal creativity can be understood as both a liberation and a limitation, 6) that the author intends to replace the reader's reality, via the text, with that of the author's reality, 7) that the author's position is not an *a priori* given, but is a reconstruction from

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[35] My main source is the four-part document that was released in Fall, 2004. It consists of a compilation of interviews and writings of Rev. Elder Troy Perry, Founder and Moderator of the MCC, which tell the story of the beginning of the MCC from his perspective.

[36] Readers interested in exploring this form of criticism would do well to consult, Mario Valdés, *Shadows in the Cave: A Phenomenological Approach to Literary Criticism Based on Hispanic Texts*, University of Toronto Press (1982).

memory and hindsight of past experience. Therefore, as a critical philosopher, I offer comment on Perry's texts from my interpretive perspective. Others will no doubt view these excerpts differently.

Perry's texts and commentary

> "In 1968, a year before New York's Stonewall Riots, a series of most unlikely events in Southern California resulted in the birth of the world's first church group with a primary, positive ministry to gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgender persons."

I recognize all these unlikely events as phenomena, expected and otherwise, which have their proper antecedent causes. Such events are existential in nature and bring about real effects in the lives of those who experience them. Knowledge of the antecedent causes, on the part of the reader/interpreter discloses a deeper and more accurate impact on the understanding of the events themselves and their significance for the author's agenda and the reader's understanding.

> "Those events, a failed relationship, an attempted suicide, a reconnection with God, an unexpected prophecy, and the birth of a dream led to MCC's first worship service: a gathering of 12 people in Rev. Troy Perry's living room in Huntington Park, California on October 6, 1968."

From a phenomenological philosophical perspective, the five events listed, a failed relationship, an attempted suicide, a reconnection

with God, an unexpected prophecy and the birth of a dream, did not occur without disclosing particular significant meaning in the life of a specific human being. That is to say that they might have had no effect socially had they occurred in some other life than that of Perry. They are not nature's events in themselves, but in some manner, have been directed through Perry's personal agency. The seeming synchronicity of such events often leads some people to see a superhuman agency as work in such events. [37] Their relationship culminated in a worship service, unique to these individuals, although it could have been otherwise. That is to say that the worship service was not a necessary outcome. For phenomenologists, unlike Hellenistic philosophers, necessity or Fate plays no role in human outcomes.

> "That first worship service in a Los Angeles suburb in 1968 launched the international movement of Metropolitan Community Churches, which today has grown to 43,000 members and adherents in almost 300 congregations in 22 countries. During the past 36 years, MCC's prophetic witness has forever changed the face of Christianity and helped to fuel the international struggle for LGBT rights and equality."

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[37] I take synchronicity to mean the seeming relation or combination of events that cannot be explained by the conventional reasoning of cause and effect and are thus attributed to a higher external power.

Since the MCC is a religious community that acknowledges the existence of a superhuman divine power the use of the word "prophetic" is appropriate in describing its public witness. However, in evaluating the public texts of the community, from my perspective, much of their content may also be classed as philosophical speculation. I say this given the comparison and contrast of philosophy and prophecy as to their characteristics in the chart overleaf.

In the above quoted text, the claim that, the "MCC's prophetic witness has forever changed the face of Christianity" interpreted as a prophetic conclusion raises a number of questions for the philosophical interpretation, particularly regarding the social structure of Christianity. Christian structures are the public face of belief and do not exist apart from the people whose philosophical and political experience having created them must be taken into account. Thus, one might ask: have the traditional churches recognized the challenge to their witness and ministry given by the the MCC experience? Traditional structures have been experienced, or at least have been perceived, to have failed in embodying Christian truth and values for LGBTQ+ individuals in terms rights and equality.

"In the early 1960s, Rev. Perry was defrocked as a clergyperson by a Pentecostal denomination because of his homosexuality. He spent the next several years struggling to

reconcile his sexuality and his Christian spirituality. Rev. Perry identifies the events that preceded the first worship MCC service: A failed romance, an attempted suicide, a reconnection with God, an unexpected prophecy and the birth of a dream."

Parallel Perspectives	
Philosophy	Prophecy
The philosopher is the bearer and interpreter of knowledge.	The prophet is the bearer and interpreter of the word of God.
The philosopher responds to the call of life as "love of wisdom."	The prophet responds to an irresistible divine call at some point in his or her life.
Philosophers discuss "signs" of knowledge given in their personal experience.	Prophets are themselves "signs" of the divine knowledge reflected in their persons.
Human knowledge is expressed through the individual temperament and natural talents of the philosopher.	The divine message is expressed through the individual temperament and natural talents of the prophet.
The philosopher's knowledge may be understood in the past, present and future.	The prophet's message relates to our present and future, as well as the prophet's own time.

Contra Perspectives	
Although possibly shared, the philosopher's words are his or her own.	The prophet's words are simultaneously God's and his or her own.
Philosophers discuss or dispute among themselves, but respectfully so.	Genuine prophets denounce those held to be spurious or as frauds.
Philosophers arise within the human community.	Prophets are sent to the people of God.

The rejection from any existing order of social relationships, in Perry's case among Pentecostal Christians, is often a devastating experience for individuals regardless of context. This devastation is a human phenomenon. One's self-understanding of, and need for, personal community, and the activities that result from community engagement, are all lost. This phenomenon amounts to nothing less than the fractured unity of the *consortium totius vitae* experienced in one's community. [38] The *consortium totius vitae* is not solely a judicial concept. It originates in the foundational understanding of human life as revealed in scripture. In Genesis 2:18 the Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helper comparable to him." In the experience of those who lobby for LGBTQ+ marriage rights, a queer reading of this scripture passage lends support to the principle of human community. That is, God is understood as establishing the *consortium totius vitae* as a condition of human life *ab initio*, from the beginning. And humanity has further developed the concept according to various cultural norms

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[38] From a Catholic perspective, Michael Lawler notes that "The Christian 'partnership of the whole life' is not about unique and occasional events; it is about the seamless whole of life. … The *consortium totius vitae* language derives from ancient Roman definitions of marriage … which controlled every discussion of marriage in the West. 'Marriage is a union of a man and a woman, and a communion of the whole of life, a participation in divine and human law.' The phrase 'communion of the whole of life' (*consortium totius vitae*) is ambiguous, open to two separate but not separable interpretations. It can mean as long as life lasts ('until death do us part'), and then implies that marriage is a lifelong covenant. It can mean everything that the spouses have ('all my worldly goods'), and then imply that nothing is left unshared between the spouses." Lawler, M. in Salzman, Todd *et al*, *Marriage in the Catholic Tradition* (2004:228-229).

which define what the *consortium totius vitae* and marriage are to mean in specific contexts.

> Perry acknowledges: "That was the problem, of course. Benny had taken God's place. I had equated him with God. I had allowed him to take the place of God in my life. I had made the mistake of placing a human being before God."

For humans, the healing truth in recognizing a problem can only come through self-reflexive activity. Even the smallest of mistakes are never recognized as mistakes as they are being made. It is only afterwards that they are recognized as having been made in error. Therefore, human memory must be invoked in order to fashion an improved future. Human beings learn from annoying and traumatic experiences, and most humans are able to re-prioritize their future values accordingly, i.e., the love for God above all. According to his narrative, Perry recognized the problem and believed himself successful in re-prioritizing his values.

[Perry's encounter with an unidentified woman who recognized his religious calling.]

> "Then the woman turned and left. I never knew her name, but when I was aware that she had gone, I remembered God. My mind started working, just like someone had thrown a switch inside it. I finally recalled that I had forgotten all about God. There was still God. It had been so long since I really knew absolutely that God did exist."

Phenomenological philosophers are frustratingly sensitive to the words they assign to significant events. Especially since in Western philosophy classical language (with adaptation) is often used to express alternative notions in the absence of an accepted phenomenological vocabulary. The word "exist," for instance, when applied to God, is a case in point. For phenomenologists, the notion of God is what is disclosed to consciousness, and the notion itself is without substance or matter. That is, God as an ontological concept, has no substance, occupies no space and appears to be present only where and when humans are conscious. Thus, where humans are not present, God is not recognized. The concept God, or some equivalent notion originating in human consciousness, is a product of the mind interpreting human experience. From a phenomenological perspective, God is an *affective* experience, often rendered in objective description. While the objective language of consciousness may be debatable, the experience of conscious affectivity is real.

History demonstrates that religious leaders are often recognized by their disciples before they recognize any leadership qualities within themselves. Perry "remembered God" after talking with the unknown lady. From a phenomenological perspective such an experience can be interpreted either prophetically (a supernatural event) or philosophically (a natural event) depending on one's preference. "Remembering God" is a transcendent experience often recorded in theistic cultures as a previous human experience. And

such experiences occur sufficiently regularly and conventionally to attest to an individual's credibility in relating the truth of such experience according to his or her understanding.

> "During this time I prayed a great deal. And the Lord began to deal with me. Things became easier. My attitudes shifted. Finally with God's help and understanding, I became convinced that He was moving me to a mission, that a vision of that mission would be revealed to me. And I knew that when it came, I must never look back; I would never have to. My journey would be forward. My course would be clear. I would know my work. It would be hard, but I would spend my life at it."

This is undoubtedly an appraisal by the author on his life's purpose from a vocational point of view. And with hindsight, it may be interpreted prophetically. Although the prophetic call often lacks a sense of a permanent life commitment. Expressed in convictional language and revealing much self-knowledge and confidence, this experience revealed to Perry a new and fulfilling purpose in his life. Within Perry's narrative, the phenomenological interpreter further recognizes a "new man" appearing on the threshold of a new beginning in his life. There are also classical narratives of religious revelations replete with similar experiences in which a new creature/creator relationship is acknowledge and affirmed by individuals. It is obvious to the secularly-minded that Perry's interpretation of his experience is not in keeping with the many

techno-digital scientific narratives of life's purpose that are appearing in the Western context. Ironically, to the secularly-minded a religious vocation appears as an avocation. That is, religious vocations are likely to be interpreted as part of the human evolutionary process in which a person is the active agent in deciding an appropriate goal and purpose in life *sans* the help of God. Secular interpretations leave little work, if any, for God to do.

> "My course was set! I had to fight to keep it from occupying all of my thoughts while I was at work. I knew that the mission was coming into focus. God wanted me to start a new church that would reach into the gay community, but that would include anyone and everyone who believed in the true spirit of God's love, peace, and forgiveness."

'God's will,' as Perry recognizes it here, is an interpretive problem for phenomenological philosophers. The will of God is tantamount to belief in an outdated understanding of a cosmos which is supernaturally ruled in all its aspects by an agency of an external God. In the minds of many phenomenological philosophers, experiencing worldly phenomena does not disclose God's intentional intervention. Rather, they observe no agency in events that are irregular, often not effective, and appear as particular occurrences in worldly affairs. Further, the invention of the classical concept of the will of God ultimately shifted human responsibility onto God, leaving little or no independent agency to the believer. To a phenomenological philosopher it is more likely that Perry's will

had been projected onto God, then reflected back to him, thus appearing to confirm his revealed mission.

> "My learning experience sped up. The Lord was really getting me ready. I knew that the word "church" would be in the title. In my free time, I used to think and pray about what kind of church God wanted me to found. I would sit in that little office in back of the yardage department at Sears and pray and think and dream. I knew God wanted a church where God could move. I think that's why "church" was always in the title. Then I would ask the Lord if it was to be really an outreach into the gay community. So the word "community" got into the title. The more I thought about it, the more I liked it. Community meant a feeling of comradeship, a small area, a place where you knew everybody. So, it would be a community church. We would also serve a large community; we would serve all of the Los Angeles area. Los Angeles is a large urban area, so the word "metropolitan" finally came to mind, and it stuck."

The phenomenon of a real church "where God could move" attracts the attention of ecclesiastical theologians especially those familiar with the biblical history of community development which is a complex theological question in itself. Of course, for most theologians the question that comes immediately to mind is, does not God move in the other churches? The insights entertained here by Perry bear no resemblance to a traditional Reformation of an

antecedent church. Rather, they appear to have arisen out of a personal experience and with no apparent and necessary relationship to a prior community. Yet, even here his perspective is problematic from a biblical interpretation. That is, Perry is building a house for God, rather than allow God to build a house for the faithful. [39] Within Perry's experience, I suspect that there is more world (i.e., politics) in the Church, than Church (i.e., salvation) in the world. Has Perry perceived God's intention correctly? Or, has Perry's intention been transposed onto the mind of God, as it were? As a phenomenon, Perry's proposed "church" appears more as a political entity, than a religious entity. There is much matter for serious and rigorous philosophical contemplation here. [40]

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[39] Cf. Psalm 127:1.

[40] As a phenomenological philosopher I venture to suggest that it is possible, at first blush, to interpret the initial appearance of the MCC as similar to earlier movements within the established church, such as the charismatic movement, or the Focolare movement, etc. Historically, according to August Franzen, as the Constantinian Church developed it "failed to maintain the detachment from the world obligatory on all Christians. It was then that *God raised up in the Church* the monastic movement, not as a 'protest' but as a clearly visible sign of Christian perfection. … The religious dynamism of monasticism saved the Church from becoming mere outward show in the Constantinian era, and also gave it fresh impulses" [my italics]. Franzen, (1986:263), *Encyclopedia of Theology*.

Some MCC adherents with an interest in religious history see a parallel here to monasticism wherein the MCC leads its members to "Christian perfection" as gay persons and supplies fresh impulses in their lives. In other words, they conceive the MCC as a legitimate "God inspired" movement with a role to play in contemporary society. However, I wonder if the comparison holds true to fact. Unlike monasticism and other similar movements, the MCC was not initiated within the established Church, but as political alternative to it. Further, while the social values (and some doctrinal perspectives) of the individual MCC communities may be similar, their structures of governance are democratic, not hierarchical. The MCC discloses itself more as a communitarian sect than a movement within any established church.

"Then I had to worry about how I was going to reach the gay community. There's always the grapevine, but church services and religion aren't usually part of that."

These sentences are of particular interest to me as I appraise Perry's document. They are identical to the questions I raised in doing research for a book I wrote in 2018 entitled: *Faith and Queer Consciousness: Philosophical Thinking in a New Key*. How was I going to reach the gay community? Eventually, my book was self-published after receiving a rejection slip from a commercial publisher specializing in gay literary subjects. There was no market for a book discussing religious and gay issues in the same context, I was told. So, I wondered what strategy I would use to reach the gay community. I present this philosophical appraisal as an addition to contemporary studies of gay culture. As the reader may, by now, have surmised, it presents a provocative and somewhat unorthodox approach to queer consciousness in which I hope to reach readers with the "gay grapevine" and to encourage philosophical interest in queer studies. There are sufficient clinically-styled or psychological assessments of the "queer' phenomenon readily available, thus, I elected to focus on a narrative appraisal.

"So I began to share my dream for the church with the gays and lesbians. They almost all had the same reaction that Willie Smith had had. Some told me to forget it. We had gone through generations, even centuries, of that awful

conviction that if you were a homosexual you could not be a child of God; you could not be a Christian."

Any literature review of the doctrines on homosexuality in traditional Christian Churches will confirm this observation. Today, many members of the MCC are seen as possessing a different self-consciousness concerning their sexual orientation which sets their understanding of human sexuality apart, and even possibly as advanced, when compared to members of traditional churches. This new self-consciousness is a phenomenon worthy of philosophical investigation.

Seen as deviant within traditional churches, homosexuality had no acceptance or approval for a variety of reasons. [41] However, in its polity the philosophical and theological consciousness of the MCC is person-centred, not institution-centred, thus preventing such misunderstood political deviance as normative in their communities. The MCC, then, discloses a new way of re-ordering religious experience. Phenomenological interpretation can result in de-institutionalization of religious traditions, while at the same time reforming relations among persons. But this does not seem to have been the case in Perry's understanding. He is not reforming any

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[41] It is to be noted that "no Greek or Latin word corresponds to the modern term *homosexuality*, and ancient Mediterranean societies did not in practice treat homosexuality as a socially operative category of personal or public life. … much less were they thought to represent a single, homogeneous phenomenon in contradistinction to sexual relations between persons of different sexes." *Classical Civilization* (2004), s. v. Homosexuality [italics in the original].

inherited tradition, but establishing an alternative one. Viewed from a phenomenological perspective, the MCC initially appears as an alternative community within normative religious culture for particular types of Christian personalities, i.e., queer individuals.

"In his desperation, the young man said to Troy [earlier]. 'God doesn't care. God doesn't care about gay people.' That spurred Perry to hold the very first MCC worship service. That first Sunday church service finally arrived — October 6, 1968."

§

"I stood nervously watching the door, worried to death. I had cleaned out the living room, set up some chairs, used the coffee table for an altar. I had borrowed a robe from the Congregationalist minister that I had helped out previously. He insisted that I had to preach in a robe for that first service. I had borrowed some trays from some very close friends, Steve and his lover, Lynn. These were for communion. I set up everything, and stood in the kitchen. Our house was one of those "shotgun" houses: From the front door, you could see all the way back. You could see right through to the back room. I could stand in the kitchen and look all the way down the hall way to the front door. I paced nervously around in my borrowed robe and clutched the Bible and thumbed

through it and riffled the pages. Then, people began to gather."

Of interest to the critical philosopher is the new level of psychological self-consciousness at which Perry had arrived. This heightened level of self-consciousness reflects the "new man" as noted above. Having borrowed the necessary paraphernalia, his preparations disclose an eclectic continuity with other Christian liturgical practices. (And as such has a borrowed robe to signify a dedicated/authenticated "preacher" status.) Although extremely simplified Perry had, in fact, initiated a personal "start-up liturgy," or a new liturgical *ad hoc* ritual obviously drawn from previous liturgical experiences. The philosopher in me asks: had Perry a deeper appreciation of liturgy (than the Pentecostal tradition) would his liturgical preparations have been undertaken differently? Most likely his "start-up" efforts were augmented by later refinements of ritual. In fairness to Perry, however, I am inclined to suspect that he made more preparations than he recorded here.

> "I recall I had assured Willie, just before we started, that God was in this. I said, 'I know now that I'm going to be in God's perfect will. Not God's permissive will as I was in my past life.'"

From a philosophical and theological point of view, in these sentences Perry makes an interesting distinction about the "wills" of God, one permissive and one perfect. Is his distinction to be taken literally as describing God as having two "wills," or to be taken

subjectively, as an experience that Perry alone has had? If meant literally, this understanding is theologically problematic given traditional Christian theology. God does not have two divine wills. However, if meant metaphorically, as describing a personal experience, it is less problematic. It discloses a change in the perceived relationship between God and Perry which is a real relationship. God's "permissive" will leaves Perry to his own abilities and devices outside of God's influence; whereas God's "perfect" will includes Perry in God's life since God understands Perry, having been made in God's image and likeness, even better than Perry understands himself. God will reveal to Perry who Perry really is.

> "They were Catholic, Episcopal, and of various Protestant sects. I fervently sought to serve a really broad spectrum of our population. It would have to be a church that most could understand and easily identify with, and accept it as not being unusual or odd. It seemed to me that it should be traditional, almost like those they attended in childhood, or not too different from that."

This paragraph returns to the distinction between church and sect as I understand it, with Perry disclosing his intention to found a familiar church-like community, not a sect. As phenomena, church and sect are distinguished by values that have, or have not, been formally incorporated into a unified organization representing the experience of the faithful. As was the case in Perry's time, problems

of corporate organization for both church and sect remain to this day in serving a broad spectrum of the population. From the point of view of a phenomenological interpretation, it is worth noting how this problematic appears. The traditional Churches are: 1) overwhelmingly conservative, 2) characterized by temporal universality, and 3) tend to dominate the masses, 4) and to stabilize the social order. Sects on the other hand: 1) are small in numbers, 2) seek inward personal perfection, 3) emphasize personal fellowship, 4) have no desire to dominate the world, 5) are not founded on dogma, 6) and members live for the experience of the present moment. They do not live within a corporate history of miraculous events. Phenomenological philosophers will to continue to observe the evolution of Perry's sect into a proper institutional church, it seems to me.

> "One day, a fellow called and asked to meet with me. I met [him] at a nearby coffee shop. We sat down and ordered. We were alone over in a corner, as he had suggested. The coffee came, and I said, 'What's on your mind? 'I'm a minister, also,' he replied. 'I teach at a Christian college in this area, where I am a dean. But it struck me that what you're doing is a needed step in a new direction. And I am interested in participating.'"

With this meeting, the evolutionary process now becomes evident as the MCC develops as a societal phenomenon. The significant disclosure here is that the MCC has been recognized by an outsider.

The evolutionary process, whether biological, social or intellectual always produces differences in kind, it never duplicates. The social and intellectual evolution of the MCC has not produced a duplicate of any established church within the public forum. (Any similarities to traditional churches have been retained from antecedent experiences as Perry previously admitted. They are not an evolutionary product of the MCC.) As a social phenomenon the MCC is recognized as offering something that the other religious bodies are not, or cannot. As a point of interest, not to be overlooked, is that there is no explicit mention of the unknown minister's sexuality. He may have only been an ally of the gay community.

> "We had a long conversation, and that's how my first ministerial recruit came in. And because of the large number of Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran people in our congregation, we relied rather heavily on those rituals."

As a growing phenomenon the MCC begins to present its religious existential face to the general public. The question now becomes for the philosopher/interpreter: Is this really a new church or just a variation of a pre-existing religious community? The antecedent experience of new members within the MCC is being acknowledged, and at this point in its history their presence is obviously influencing the creative and novel efforts at forming a LGTBQ+ congregation. In matters religious the MCC at this stage is developing in a pattern similar to a classical religious formation, that is, through a form of conversion. In matters secular, however,

that is, in a world of techno-digital science culture, it remains to be seen how the MCC will sustain its membership. Today, a shift from religious justification to political rights as its *raison d'être* seems to be occurring within the community. The scaled down ideologies of the religious past often remain concealed in the experience of the secular present, even if unwittingly. "Mother nature," being uncontrollable, etc. fulfills the role of God in the contemporary secular experience. The secular values of human dignity and individual worth are rooted in the religious values of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans all share classical hierarchical structures each with their traditional baggage. Whereas, in the more recent organization of the MCC there is evidence that it is not a hierarchical governed institution according to its 2020 *Clergy Manual.*

"Then we began to organize. We utilized the books of worship from the Episcopal, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches as well as those that members of the congregation wanted considered. We experimented and we accommodated. It may sound like a hodgepodge, but what emerged was a straight line of well-organized ritual that allows for improvisation or change should any occasion within the church warrant it."

Here, from Perry's perspective, the MCC is presented as a dynamic phenomenon, not as a static one. The emergence of "a straight line of well-organized ritual" appears to place the MCC within the

category of a church, not a sect, capable of adaptation. As such, the MCC envisions itself to be less influenced by ancient Greek philosophy with its static concepts and more dynamically inclined to an understanding of existential evolutionary change to accommodate the needs of its members. Further, it is significant that experimentation and accommodation with liturgical ritual began with ecclesiastical traditions that generally had their roots in the Age of the Enlightenment, which, in turn, had their roots in older religious liturgical practices.

> "But it is not the mechanics of worship that we were concerned with. It was the substance of the act of worship that was the core of our service. We did have diversity. We were ignored in the straight world."

As a critical philosopher, I wonder if "the substance of the act of worship," not merely its mechanics, refers to an unacknowledged Platonic understanding. Is there something more being claimed here to which an act of worship points yet is denied within the straight world? Also, from my philosophical perspective I wonder if, by the last two sentences, Perry means that the "straight" world prefers uniformity and convention, to diversity and creativity. If so, his observation fits within the queer agenda.

> "But not everyone in the straight world pretended we were not there. Sociologists, professional people, teachers,

professors, psychologists and the enlightened came. They made a great and lasting contribution."

The "straight" world is definitely an existential phenomenological concept that has appeared in contradistinction to the "gay" world. It denotes more than a simple description of those who are not gay. The concept "gay world" denotes an attitude to life in general that varies from person to person in degrees and in intensity from the straight world. To be noted, both the gay and straight worlds, in fact, do not vary in kind. Both are the same kind of human experience of sexuality characteristic of the person. An individual may participate in either world to varying depths of consciousness and social engagements without needing to remain exclusively in either one of them. In other words, humans manage their sexual appetite and direct its satisfaction within heterosexual or homosexual activity. I also wonder why the non-professionals (and the unenlightened) appear to be omitted from Perry's list of contributors. Are they in a world of their own where straight and gay experiences do not happen? It seems to me, however, in a gay world envisioned by the MCC these enlightened professionals could be a perpetual source of a professional administrative clergy.

"There's an old saying that goes, 'The future is as bright as the promises of God.' And I believe that with all my heart. I really believe that."

Compare and contrast this attitude with the attitude of the founding leaders of other religious communities in their attempts at

accommodating diversity in the church. The differences will appear to be striking. The MCC and the traditional religious orders appear as phenomenal entities that exist autonomously outside of formally organized and state-established governing structures. From an obverse philosophical perspective, the MCC may be conceived as dissimilar to the Medieval religious communities. The Medieval religious communities established a particular and normative order in constituting their presence in society. Whereas the MCC has disclosed (initially at least) the appearance of dis-order, or, positively stated, diversity within its constitutional presence in society.

Before concluding my present reflections on the MCC as a church or sect with respect to Perry's original intentions, I ask: could the MCC's governing structure, as a societal phenomenon, be a reflection of the modern synagogue system? Except for the existence of an official clergy leading sacrificial worship, I conclude the answer is likely yes. As an online description of the synagogue system notes: Modern synagogues carry on the same basic functions associated with ancient synagogues but have added social, recreational, and philanthropic programs as the times demand. They are essentially democratic institutions established by a community of Jews who seek God through prayer and sacred studies. The liturgy has no sacrifice, no priesthood that is required for public worship. Because each synagogue is autonomous, its erection, its maintenance, and its rabbi and officials reflect the desires of the

local community. There is no standard synagogue architecture. A typical synagogue contains an ark (where the scrolls of the Law are kept), an "eternal light" burning before the ark, two candelabra, pews, and a raised platform (bimah), from which scriptural passages are read and from which, often, services are conducted. The segregation of men and women, a practice that is still observed in Orthodox synagogues, has been abandoned by Reform and Conservative congregations.

It is beyond the scope of this work to compare the MCC liturgy, or any liturgies with a synagogue liturgy. My suspicion, however, is that if this were done, excluding any form of eucharistic ritual, or "open table" concept within the MCC, the resulting liturgy might appear more closely related to the modern synagogue system than any ecclesiastical system. Or, it could reflect the Catholic Church's Liturgy of the Word as free standing from the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

In concluding this personal queer appraisal, the texts I have examined disclose an evolutionary process of conscious development where the MCC phenomenon appears to be merging into the mainstream of religious expression. It is losing its perception as a sect, and becoming more like a church, although not a traditional one. It is evolving and developing within the history and evolution of Western humanistic philosophy, but not of the atheistic variety. Of interest to phenomenological philosophers is

the MCC's consciously projected political development and regulated evolution in light of a posthuman philosophical culture which appears to be looming in humanity's future. How likely is it that MCC will successfully transition out of its present inclusive humanism into an indeterminate, yet inclusive, posthuman future? This is a challenge that is common to both straight and gay religious communities as they seek a (new) role for God in their posthuman communities. In a posthuman (global) culture humans will live in and with an increased diversity of institutions subject to many varying cultural influences. And unlike the colonial European political empires, the democratic American philosophical (political) empire will not be accepted by local cultures as imported, but will be received by them contingently as they make necessary and particular adaptations. Posthuman philosophy, by virtue of its existential activity, has no inherent or pre-determined purpose. The purpose of posthuman philosophy is set by the philosophers and secularize thinkers (with God playing a minimal, or no role) and whose presence is to be implemented by the politicians as to what agreeably falls within the sphere of acceptable and legitimate human behaviour. Posthuman philosophy, evolving out of modern humanism, has a different purpose than its antecedent. [42] That is to

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[42] Briefly, I hold that posthuman philosophy is a collection of ideas and notions that have been emerging since the 1990s and advocates that humans are, and always will be, the only agents in a moral world. Post-human philosophers argue that in a techno-digital future, an understanding of the world as a moral hierarchy, which places humans at the top, and as the summit of creation, will no longer be tenable in light of existential experience.

say that religious belief and its visible structures, along with a new conception of God, will thus occupy a new place in the posthuman world. In the next essay I clarify my understanding about the philosophical concept of posthumanity.

ADDENDUM

So, What's "Post" about Posthumanity?

Posthumanity is a difficult and refractory subject to understand philosophically. This is because posthuman philosophy amounts to a new *ordering* of our knowledge with the principles derived from sociological observation and classical philosophy. Many philosophers find difficulty in orienting themselves within this new phase of philosophy due to its complex intellectual background. But for others, particularly *avant-garde* philosophers, to inquire into the posthuman phenomenon is a necessary task as the techno-digital human experience appears to be re-ordering modern Western thought. That being the case, the philosopher must always keep in mind the history of the role of religious faith in human life, in human desires, and as the hope of human beings. That is to say that the philosopher must understand classical humanism before understanding *post*humanism as a possible and more appropriate philosophical perspective for the 21st century and beyond. I suggest that scientific humanism is itself a version of posthumanism.

The philosophy of humanism in general affirms that supernatural powers exist and that a relationship with such powers is possible and even necessary. Traditionally, this necessity is expressed in a culture's "sacred history" of religious belief which is not intended to *explain* phenomena but rather to *regulate* human activity. At

every stage of evolution, humans have been philosophizing about the organization and the regulation of the powers of body, mind and spirit. I suggest that those philosophers who ponder culture and believe in the value of philosophy, though not necessarily in the specific tenets of every philosopher, realize the present-day under-utilization of philosophy for a proper development of the human mind. Our whole future society needs to work for the maintenance of those living philosophical truths which have taken humanity out of barbarism to culture. The loss of living philosophical truths will threaten us again with barbarism.

Philosophers who take emanationism as a serious philosophical view tend to ignore personal intervention in favour of an inner logic that is based on an ideological or isolated individual value system. Posthumanity philosophy abandons this inner logic and isolated value system of understanding and views itself as both actively defining and fashioning the individual personality. Posthuman philosophy is essentially a set of intersubjective notions shared by individuals which in turn influences their choices in life. By way of contrast, in humanism the major themes of thought have tended to converge on an objective union of common understanding even if only potentially so. Posthuman philosophy, on the other hand, seems to be developing in the opposite direction towards diversity and any such convergence to union is artificially conceived. However, there is an aspiration to *unity* of intent within posthuman philosophical consciousness where subject *relates* to object. But that relation is

not to be equated with the *union* of the human understanding where a subject *apprehends* the essence of an object.

In posthuman philosophy it is the meaning the individual gives to life that shapes one's personality as opposed to conforming to an objective ideal. Posthuman philosophy is not a social fact like science whose purpose is to prevent humanity from inventing false ideas about the powers experienced in life. Rather, posthuman philosophy is a conscious perspective constituting moral harmony among these powers variously understood, which are felt to originate from a subjective internal source. Humans recognize this moral harmony as immanent in themselves yet calls for external objective representation. Humanity has made, within recorded history, a representation of this moral harmony by the aid of religious symbols. [43] With respect to religious convictions, posthuman philosophy does not deny or assert that there is some fundamental pre-set purpose, either intrinsic to nature, or extrinsic to nature, that determines humanity's goals. Rather, posthuman philosophy presents an alternative stance which focuses on establishing goals through an indeterminant and perpetually evolving human consciousness. It does not seek its philosophical goals in classical Revelation.

What is "post" in posthumanism is a novel understanding of

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[43] Cf. Emile Durkheim (1915). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* George Allen & Unwin.

metaphysics. Posthuman metaphysics is non-substantive, that is, posthuman metaphysics lacks objective necessity. Even if it should finally be true that there is for posthuman philosophical contemplation some principle of ultimate determinateness (presently unknown) one need not assume, or suppose, that it is an objective metaphysical "other" that "butts in" to the course of humanity's goals. [44] Posthuman philosophy holds to the view that an individual does not interpret present events exactly as past events occurred, but consciously defines every present situation as only similar to past situations. In other words, human memory does not duplicate events. A memory is its own event which is a new interpretation in the present moment of recall.

When philosophers ask: Is posthuman "truth" the same as human "truth," this inquiry begs the question concerning the "post" in posthumanity. The idealism of truth in humanism is questioned in posthumanism. Posthuman philosophy has no room for any idealism that postulates "a sphere of perfection which does not bear the scars of its origins and, measured by which, all events and processes are shown to be finite and incomplete." [45] Posthuman philosophy is an existential philosophy that interprets life-situations and is not dependent upon ideological construction of an eternal truth. In other words, in posthumanism, truth does not reside outside experience.

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[44] Cf. Tolman, E. C. (1932). *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men*, Century Company.
[45] Cf. Karl Mannheim (1936). *Ideology and Utopia*, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Philosophers have never been able to universalize the original Platonism of Hellenic philosophy. The original Platonism of Hellenic thought has undergone numerous revisions and formulations in the forms of Neo-Platonism, Renaissance Platonism, and German Idealism, each of which represents a new creation expressing Platonism's essence and ideology.

Humanistic philosophy is dependent upon Hellenistic philosophical principles which are self-contained as intellectual abstract terms. That is, Hellenistic principles are theoretical. Posthuman philosophy, to the contrary, is dependent upon individual and particular concrete experience. That is, it is pragmatic. Thus, posthuman philosophy is a continuing development of the organic/techno-digital world of human experience. It is a non-classical effort of the human mind to render an appropriate interpretation of earthly experience. Posthuman philosophy aspires to go beyond the bounds of historical time since it has no defined boundaries of its own, but is "limited" only by the existential context of the conscience human being. Posthuman philosophy is not "culture-bound" to the *laudator temporis acti* of classical philosophy, i.e., one who praises past times.

Posthuman philosophy is focused on an elaboration and continuation of the permanent and necessary effort of Western humanity to understand itself and its relationship to other living species. It goes beyond classical philosophy by enabling the human

agent to consciously direct the evolution of its self-interpretation towards an open-ended and indeterminate future. Posthuman philosophical understanding is a further elaboration of the classical philosophical traditions that remain evident intellectual life of the human species. Posthuman understanding continues the evolution which began with the philosophical development of classical Western philosophy, through to Renaissance humanism, to secular thinking, and beyond. In short, posthuman philosophy promises to "surpass" the mere rational animal nature of humankind since it is more self-consciously active.

Posthuman philosophy is able to determine an appropriate place for that which in the philosophy of humanism is reflective of the divine in human experience — what humanism calls "religion." But not a place similar to that of classical humanism, but in a place in interpretive consciousness that addresses the sacred in human experience. That is to say that posthuman philosophy posits classical philosophy in a somewhat secondary position. As is the case that in all academic disciplines, classics remain classics because no better solution to interpretation has been found. The task of posthuman philosophy, is first to determine what is "post" about humanism. It is that humanity must constantly reach beyond what the classics have commended to humanity. Enhanced precision of thought, not increased quantity of experience, will be able find a better solution to interpreting the puzzle of human existence. A posthuman philosophy of consciousness, which has no boundaries of its own,

allows humanity to transcend itself.

A MEDITATION on LGBTQ+ and SEXUALITY

I wrote these essays on queer consciousness and religious expression primarily with the MCC in mind. I contend that the MCC continues to form itself in light of the political and social values of human sexuality brought to consciousness and advanced through the LGBTQ+ agenda as reflecting gay sexuality. That being the case I offer a reflection on some aspects of the understanding of sexuality as espoused by the LGBTQ+ as a social phenomenon in the 21st century.

First, the LGBTQ+ movement is an American cultural phenomenon. It appearance as a political movement it could happen nowhere else than in North American culture. It has spread globally just as American culture has spread globally. Its appearance in the general society is a political luxury that only a country with abundant wealth and leisure could possibly afford. Like the phenomenon of video games, the LGBTQ+ phenomenon is a product of the values and aspirations of a consumer society. I suggest that the philosophy driving the LGBTQ+ movement is the same as that drives the sub-culture of video games. The cover of a recent video games study states, "The Bioshock series looms large in the industry and culture of video games for its ambitious incorporation of high-minded philosophical questions and retro-futuristic aesthetics into the ultraviolent first-person shooter genre. … Offering bold new

perspectives on a canonical series, *Beyond the Sea* is a timely contribution to our understanding of the aesthetics, the industry, and the culture of video games." [46] I suggest that much the same may soon be said about the organizational polity of the LGBTQ+ movement.

Within the straight community some view the appearance of this movement as one that is ultimately harmful to many gay individuals who do not share in the values of an overt gay and lesbian culture. The LGBTQ+ agenda brings nothing but despair to these individuals who for some legitimate reason are not into "the scene." Yet, many in the straight community do not object to the gay sexuality portrayed, but rather protest against the organized "cult" of the queering of human sexual expression as socially unacceptable. The organized queer expression advocated by the LGBTQ+ political agenda does not function as a source of value or of personal identity within Western culture according to those who object to a cult status. Given its cult status, the LGBTQ+ movement leads to competitive consumption and anxious cynicism in the minds of some gay individuals and many straight individuals.

As a political phenomenon the question arises: Can the LGBTQ+ movement bestow the identity it promises and achieve the legislative goals to which it aspires? Character formation and

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[46] Felan Parker & Jessica Aldred (2018). *Beyond the Sea: Navigating Bioshock*, McGill-Queen's University Press. Montreal/Kingston.

political goals have shifted in North American society from the family, to the peer group and today the mass media appears to have an inordinate influence on public secular morality. I doubt, at this point, that Western society has generally internalized the variety of values observed and espoused within the LGBTQ+ agenda. In fact, I am of the opinion that many, youth and seniors, erroneously envision the world of LGBTQ+ values as a new and previously "forbidden" world now made politically and freely available.

Every identity crisis, personal and public has an apparent or unapparent element of sexuality within it. In North America the overall dominating cultural value of public human sexuality has been to regulate it within the boundaries of the entertainment/recreation industry. Given their high degree of invisibility in recent history, religious values of any sort are difficult to identify with human consciousness. More than one social commentator has recognized the tyrannical status of the entertainment/recreation industry with respect to advancing the aggressive nature of human sexuality, rather than the peaceful aspect of religious belief. In short, sex, of whatever variety, sells. Human sexuality is free in its expression when it is not forced into fixed patterns of behaviour pursued for financial or political gain.

An ethical question arises: Should what is being done at the moment determine what ought to be done? In other words, is the LGBTQ+ agenda to be tolerated and accepted without question? Its politics

are being played out in the hyper emotional environment of human sexuality which is the location of a leisure-consumer society seemingly devoid of a religious social maturity. The notion of anti-religious secularism, not spiritual secularization, seems to be the motivating force behind much of the LGBTQ+ presence in public forum. The movement is not unique in this respect, of course. To end this short meditation, I leave the reader with a quotation from Harvey Cox which I believe is still applicable for our 21st century society.

> We are placed in a community of selves, free to the extent that we live for each other, free to develop whatever styles of life will contribute to the maturation of persons in a society where persons are often overlooked as we scamper to pursue profits and piety all at once. [47]

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[47] *The Secular City*, (p. 188.)

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